A MEANDER OF IMAGES

NORMA LORIMER

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BOOKS BY NORMA LORIMER

THERE WAS A KING IN EGYPT
THE GOD'S CARNIVAL
ON DESERT ALTARS
A WIFE OUT OF EGYPT
WITH OTHER EYES
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BY

NORMA LORIMER

AUTHOR OF
"THE GODS' CARNIVAL," "A WIFE OUT OF EGYPT," "THERE WAS A KING IN EGYPT," "WITH OTHER EYES," ETC., ETC.

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A MENDER OF IMAGES

PART I

CHAPTER I

Zita Mazzini and her brother Salvatore lived in a two-roomed house in the main street of Girgenti, the ancient Acragas, the Roman Agrigentum.

A stranger would not endorse Pindar's words that Acragas was "the fairest of mortal cities," and certainly the surroundings of Zita's home were not fair; indeed, there was much that was ugly quite close to her door—and Sicily can be ugly. But Zita herself was fair and to her Pindar's words were indisputable.

It must be remembered that Girgenti was the only city which Zita had ever seen, added to which she knew its other face. Girgenti, like everything else in Sicily, has two faces. Girgenti was her "paese," and to a Sicilian what is not summed up in that sacred word?

Girgenti is set on a hill and lies between the mountains and the "wine-blue" sea of Diodorus Siculus. Its ugly face tells you that it is a mining city, which sulphur has made prosperous. Its beautiful face soars up from mediæval walls which look over the historical plain of splendour-loving Acragas.

Zita loved her home, which meant to her, as it does to all Italians, the locality in which she lived. She was proud of her city, which had perpetuated as a city part of the Greek colony whose founders came from Gela in B. C. 592. She knew it with its volta faccia under every possible condition, when the spring rain brought a harvest of flowers into bloom around the golden temples and asphodels make a delicate carpet for unseen feet to tread.

She also knew it when the sirocco raised pyramids of dust on the white roads and upset the nerves of the people. But Zita was young and strong; the sirocco left her untouched. But it affected her brother Salvatore; while it blew he was nervous and depressed.

Salvatore was employed by the Archæological authorities as a digger and excavator. His days were spent in restoring to sight the buried greatness of Girgenti. He was allowed to augment his wages, which scarcely averaged one franc forty per day, by digging for himself on the outskirts of classic sites and in river beds. Whatever he found, whole or broken, little or big, he was bound on oath to show to the museum authorities; what they did not wish to keep for the museums of Sicily, they returned to Salvatore, who sold them to the tourists who flocked to the temples each spring.

This arrangement was a very good one. It secured for the authorities the services of an exceptionally intelligent digger, while it gave Salvatore an independent interest in his work. Of course he could not have held the post if he had not been a man of established integrity. His father, Orestes Mazzini, had been an authority on the ancient coins of Sicily; he had acted as a guide and interpreter to eminent visitors, such as Professor Freeman and Cardinal Newman.

If the saying is true, that to love a country is to understand it, then Orestes Mazzini understood his classic Sicily.

He had died of fever while he was still a young man, leaving his wife, a delicate creature from the Island of Ischia, to bring up little Zita and her boy Salvatore as best she could.

And so it came to pass that Salvatore, who had at a very early age developed a passion for archæology, was employed by the Government as a digger.

Each day when Zita's two-roomed house was tidied up she would turn the key of the door, which opened on to the street, put it in her pocket and follow her brother to the site of his work. She seldom spent many hours of the day in her cottage; she preferred being with her brother; and to tell the truth, he felt happier and more at ease when she was somewhere within sight and hearing. He did not do as the other men did, when they left their young wives or daughters—lock them in their homes and take the key in their pockets. Salvatore's father had never treated his mother in this Eastern fashion, which has been handed down from the Saracen invasion.

One spring day Zita was preparing to go to her brother; she was putting the last strip of an elaborate piece of knitting, which was to form about the seventeenth part of a bed quilt, into her fig-basket along with her frugal lunch. Her house had been swept from corner to corner, with a palm-leaf broom and dusted with a bunch of turkey feathers. Her beautiful dark hair was tucked under a bright orange handkerchief, for Zita never wore a hat. She had never even tried one on her pretty head; she did not belong to the class in Sicily to whom a hat gives a social standing. In Girgenti, hats were not seemly for working girls.

Kerchiefed and smiling, Zita was turning the key in her front door. Late in the afternoon she would return to kindle the charcoal and prepare her brother's supper.

Something made her hesitate and she re-entered the cottage. A picture of the Madonna hung on the wall close to the door; on a shelf below it a lighted wick was floating in a Greek saucer, which had once held votive offerings to a pagan god. Such trifles of Greek handcraft were cheaper for domestic purposes than anything Zita could buy in Girgenti.

She stood before the picture with bowed head. For a moment a look of tragedy hung on her eyelashes, but it was only for a moment. When her prayer was finished she picked up her long basket and left the cottage. Before the door was locked the shadow of the tragedy had left her lashes; the girl was "La Gioconda" again.

Greetings were called out to her as she hurried along the street, for everyone knew where she was going to and everyone loved her. Zita was "simpatica" to her finger-tips; she responded to the finest vibration of her surroundings; the joys and troubles of her neighbours were her own. Besides which she possessed all the qualities which endear a girl to a people who have inherited the worship of beauty.

Look at her as she walks, her basket on her head—notice her little nose, straight drawn from brow to tip, yet without hint of severity; look at the curling lips, the dented chin, round with youth's softness, yet moulded by the sure hand which gave Greece her glory. It is not difficult to see from which of the many strains in Sicily she comes, this child of the South, born in the Acragas of the ancients. It is good to look at the classic perfection of a Greek statue humanized by the glow of health and laughter, a living Tanagra figure hurrying down to the plain of Acragas.

Soon Zita had left the sulphur city far behind; it towered above her in the distance, mediævally secure on its long ridge of precipitous rocks, a Zion city, fair and sublime. She was passing the Convent of St. Nicola, whose stone-pine marks the road to the temples; she was quite close to the ruin of an ancient Greek house which lies on the opposite side of the road, when she heard her name called softly.

"Zita, little Zita, stop a moment."

"Buon giorno, Signore."

Zita did not lift her eyes. Salvatore had told her that his work that day would be at the far-off Temple of Aesculapius; she did not wish to linger, as she had just enough time to reach the fragment of the temple, which to-day is incorporated in a modern farm, before lunch. Besides, the voice that had called so persuasively belonged to one of the "signori" under whose direction Salvatore worked. She knew it instantly.

With a light movement the man who had called her cleared the Greek wall and was at the girl's side. Zita's heart was fluttering and beating like a little bird imprisoned in a human hand. The Signore laid firm fingers on her shoulder and turned her round until she faced the entrance to the Greek house—a mere foundation of a house, to ordinary eyes only a mass of beautifully cut stones.

"I have something which I want you to take to your brother," the Signore said. His hands still held the girl's shrinking shoulders; her small breasts were rising and falling under the white kerchief of her bodice. Tuned to the beauty of Greece, he saw their form stripped of their modern covering. Zita was a Greek statuette insulted by clothes. His thoughts undressed her—he saw her naked and unspoilt; he would have stripped her in the open sunlight and set her on a Greek pedestal in the Greek house.

Zita was silent. Some strange part of her enjoyed what she greatly feared, the touch of the man's hand and the gentleness of his voice. She wished that she could leave him and fly like one of the white falcons overhead to the safe presence of her brother. Her southern blood needed no provoking; even while she longed to run away from him as quickly as her young legs would carry her, she felt more alive and responsive than she had ever felt in her life.

When her companion had led her a little way back from the high road, further into the interior of the excavated house, he said persuasively, and at the same time authoritatively, "Sit down, Zita. What makes you so afraid?" His eyes laughed at her foolishness, while they caressed her body.

Zita sat down, but she did not answer. He took her basket from her head and placed it behind her back. He had seated himself beside her on one of the low foundation walls of the house. Zita, who was still silent, plucked some mauve flowers from a bush of wild thyme. A bee disturbed in its honey-gathering, flew up into her face; she gave a little scream and her companion drove off the bee. As he did so he looked into her eyes and said:

"Wise little bee, to prefer such pretty lips to wild thyme! An intelligent bee, Zita mia."

Zita blushed. Her heart was distressed. Why did her brother's employer speak to her like that? Why did his eyes always say more than his words?

"Prego, Signore, will it please you to give what you wish me to take to my brother? Even now he is expecting me at the farm."

"You must not go all that way alone, child." The Signore knew what "the farm" meant.

"I am not afraid, Signore."

"You are not afraid of the farm dogs and of all that rough walk, and yet a little honey-bee made you cry out! Zita mia, you are delicious."

"Prego, Signore, I was startled." She tried to rise to her feet, but the Signore put his hand on her shoulder and prevented her. He did it in a commanding manner; he was her brother's employer.

"I want to talk to you, Zita. Sit still."

"Prego, Signore."

"You are a good little girl, Zita, and a very industrious one. I know that inside that bundle there is some fine knitting; I know that these little hands," he placed his own on hers, "will be busy all day long."

"Si, Signore." Zita's beautiful profile was not turned; not once did she let her eyes meet the eyes of the Signore.

"Tell me," he said, "what is all this knitting for? Do you sell it?"

"Sell it?" Zita's eyes were wide with wonder. "No, Signore—it is for my sposalizio."

"Then you are going to be married?"

"Spero di si, Signore" (I hope so). Zita looked profoundly wise, but surprised at the question.

"Is the day fixed?"

"Ma, Signore. I have not met him yet."

Her companion laughed.

"Dear little Zita—you are going to be married, but you have not yet met your man?"

"No, Signore." Zita spoke simply; she saw no humour in the situation. Of course she was going to be married;

she was healthy and young, and all the world had told her she was pretty and good.

"You will marry and settle down in Girgenti?"

"Spero di si, Signore." Her eyes brightened.

"Don't you want to see the great world, Zita mia?" He spoke absently. "You have seen nothing of it but that ancient city up there in the clouds. There is a wonderful world waiting for you, little girl."

"Prego, Signore, I have seen Porto Empedocle!" She spoke proudly; his words hurt her.

Her companion laughed tenderly. "You dear little donna! Porto Empedocle! Yes, you have seen that sulphur port and Girgenti—they are your world."

Zita was silent.

"Don't you want to see the big cities on the Continent?" Sicilians always speak of Italy as the "Continent."

Zita shook her head. "Prego, Signore, I think for humble people it does not do them much good to see the world. When our Girgenti boys return from America, with money in their pockets, Salvatore says they have lost everything else; they are too rich to be polite; they are vulgar."

"In vero, Zita mia, America does not improve the young Sicilian. But I was thinking of your Italian cities, of Rome, Naples, Florence."

Zita again shook her head and looked at her simple dress. "Salvatore dreams all day and all night of seeing Rome and Athens, Signore, but for me, if I see Palermo some day, I shall be content."

"Who knows, Gioconda? The gods are kind to those who love mirth. Put away that serious face and smile again—you haven't smiled since I met you. Do I deserve those sad eyes?"

"Ma, Signore, but I must go to my brother. Please do not detain me; I shall cause him anxiety."

"Unkind Zita, you have all this spring day to spend knitting and watching your brother at his work. I have seen you sitting under the big fig-tree, knit, knit, knitting; I have often wondered what your little head was full of! Tell me, child, what do you think about while you sit so patiently? Your eyes are sometimes grave and thoughtful, sometimes they laugh."

Zita blushed. "Indeed I cannot tell you—my thoughts are too foolish for a clever Signore. They come into my head and fly out again so quickly that I do not remember what I have been thinking about; they are like my dreams, forgotten when I wake."

"I am sure they are pretty thoughts, for you smile so gaily. The boys call you 'La Gioconda'—you see, I know all about you, piccola donna."

"If I smile, Signore, how can I help it? When I see the little kids skipping about the ruins, so full of fun and frolic; or when I tell myself stories about the clouds chasing each other up in the high sky, hurrying away to the land which is over the edge of the world—the clouds are my chariots, the people of my smiles are seated in them. It is when I am thinking about these foolish ignorant things that I smile, Signore. I have so little learning; I do not know enough to make me serious like Salvatore."

"Dio mio, my little Zita! You are apologizing for your smiles! You need not be ashamed because you have not the grave face of a Madonna. It is because of your gift of mirth and love of life, child, that I want to sit and talk to you; you make me forget."

"Prego, Signore. . . ." Zita could say no more. She could not contradict the learned Signore, but she wished that he would not talk to her any more.

"You know that the ancients called your island 'the laughing land'— it was their name for it. But the women and the men in Sicily to-day are very grave and unmirthful."

"There is much sadness, Signore."

"Yes, Fate has treated her pitilessly; she has had many cruel conquerors." He paused. "In one of the basketfuls of rubbish which Salvatore picks up in the ruins, you can trace the hand of five civilisations, civilisations which have left their scars on the people."

Zita's quick brain visualized the fragments of antiques which explained his words.

"The burden of tyranny and cruelty have told on the expression and character of the people; that is why so many of them are grave and suspicious. But you, Zitina, you are different. You are a child of ancient Greece, a daughter of 'the laughing land.' When these temples were perfect, when this Greek house was inhabited by the old Dorians from Gela, you were a daughter of the house; you went to the temples to worship, not to watch your brother picking up bits of terracotta and broken images. My little Greek Zita, this is your true home, this Greek house with its mosaiced floors," he pointed to the design of mosaic at their feet, "and wide-columned courtyard, this is your real home, not that white cottage up in Girgenti." He turned his head to where the city towered up above them, sublimely still and clear.

"It is beautiful to hear you talk, Signore, but much of what you say I only half understand. My true home is with Salvatore."

"I mean your spiritual home, Zita. For some unknown reason your reincarnated natural body is now living in Girgenti; your present-day upbringing has made you a modest, retiring little Sicilian girl, but at heart you are a Greek Hedonist."

Zita's eyes expressed her fears.

"But you are so unhappy, child. Andiamo (come along)." He rose to his feet.

"Prego, Signore, I am not unhappy, mi scusi."

"Only unhappily happy—is that it?" His eyes looked into hers and their richer language told her his meaning. She was only unhappily happy because—well, because she dared not be happy!

"Si, Signore, grazie."

"You would like to allow yourself to be happy and to talk to me as I want you to talk, freely and naturally?"

Zita's eyes dwelt on his; he was kindling the first flame of passion.

"You would like to be kind to me, when all I ask can so easily be given—just to sit here quietly and let me enjoy your smiles and unspoilt beliefs."

"Si, Signore, it is always pleasant to be kind."

"Grave little donna, come along." He lifted her as lightly as if she had been a bird over the low wall which surrounded the mosaiced floor and together they passed through a large courtyard, where twenty-eight bases of the ancient columns which had once surrounded it, when it had formed a colonnade in front of the bachelor's sleeping quarters, were still intact. Out of the colonnade they passed into a smaller court, which in its turn took them into an outer hall, which led directly on to the street.

In Greek days it must have been a very comfortable mansion; to-day it is but a herb-scented ruin, where bees and blue butterflies flit about the southern vegetation, which has taken a fancy to the classic stones.

As they walked towards the temples, Zita was silent and her tall companion was very dignified. He did not distress her by saying things which she knew he would not say if her brother had been walking with them; he told her instead simple legends about the temples and about almost every step of the ground over which they picked their way—a very rough way and a very long one. The Signore had the gift of tongues and a very human appreciation of historic legends and folk-lore.

When at length they reached the farm where Salvatore was working, the Signore called out, "Ecco, Salvatore! Here is Zita—I detained her. I wanted her to bring this to you and then I thought I would bring it myself. I want to speak to you."

Salvatore thanked his employer as he took the new tool which he held out to him. Then they quickly entered into a technical discussion which excluded Zita, who only too gladly took herself off to a pleasant spot and opened her bundle. The fennel and the bread were laid carefully in the shade; the wine for their lunch Salvatore would purchase for one soldo at the farm. When the frugal lunch was laid in readiness, out came her knitting. With a still fluttering heart and beating pulses, she began to work at such a pace that the date of her "sposalizio" might very well have been settled for that day week.

Poor little heart, so brutally disturbed! It was not the first time that the Signore, who was such a good master to her brother, had caused her the same unaccountable pleasure, the same indefinite pain. A Sicilian girl is a woman in her cradle. Zita knew perfectly well, although she had no mother to tell her, all the unspoken things which the Signore's eyes had implored. She feared him and yet if the trust must be told, she enjoyed the fear. She was relieved and glad to be away from him and yet her day was fuller for having seen him. He always roused the same thoughts in her, thoughts which sprang into being with the touch of his hand and the request in his eyes. Life had been very vital as they walked together under the gay sunlight.

As she knitted, her eyes were not raised to her chariots in the clouds; to-day her world beyond the edge of the world was a strange world, a world filled with new dangers and possibilities. With bent head and industrious hands, she was conscious of the fact that the eyes of the Signore were even now constantly watching her.

He was in Zita's eyes elegant and very grazioso, as she expressed it. But why did he care to spend his time in talking to a poor girl like herself? Why did he pretend that her ignorant company cheered him and did him good? She almost made up her mind to tell her brother that when he was out of hearing the Signore spoke to her and made pretty speeches to her. But no sooner had she determined to tell him, than she deceived herself into the belief that he would only laugh at her and tell her that she was a vain baby.

And so the hours wore on, but Zita's mirth did not return, not until the Signore had left the farm and Salvatore joined her for their mid-day meal. When he did so, he flung himself down on the ground beside her and looked straight up into the sky, his clasped hands behind his head. Zita drew the blade of a peasant's knife from its wooden sheath, and cut up the bulbous white root of the fennel; when it was prepared she handed a portion of it to her brother with a large slice of rough bread.

Salvatore's white teeth dug eagerly into the fresh vegetable, which was deliciously cool and appetising. His breakfast had consisted of a cup of black coffee.

Zita too ate her fennel with the healthy appetite of the meagrely fed.

The brother and sister were devoted to each other. Zita thought Salvatore a hundred times more learned than he was—and he was no mean scholar—and the handsomest man in Girgenti; Salvatore loved his little sister with a father's as well as a brother's devotion. For six years he had been mother, father and brother to her, for he was seven years her senior. Zita was just seventeen.

Salvatore was proud of her refinement and had taken great pains to carry on her education himself, after her ordinary school term had come to an end. He knew that she was lovely and gracious and that her movements were refined and elegant. The idea that Zita's life was a dull one for a beautiful girl had never dawned upon him. How could she be dull when everyone who knew her called her "La Gioconda?"

. . . .

When Salvatore had washed down his meal with a long draught of red wine, he told his sister that the next day the Signore wanted him to go to Monserrato, a long hill which lies between Girgenti and Porto Empedocle. Now Porto Empedocle is the sea-port for Girgenti and the surrounding country; you can see its harbour stretching out into the African sea from almost any point in the landscape.

"You will be away all day, fratello mio?"

"Gia—it will be dark before I get back."

Zita was silent; but her brother did not notice her new mood of abstraction because he himself had business on his mind which kept him preoccupied.

For some days Salvatore had looked worried and been unusually silent. Zita had concluded that his work was more exacting and difficult than usual.

Salvatore was by nature a dignified Sicilian; his fine cast of countenance was as serious as Zita's was mirthful. If he had been well off, he would probably have led the life of a retired student. It was perhaps well for him that he was not, for he was not very robust physically, and it is better to study Greece in Sicily, under the blue of her southern sky and in the sunlight of her hills, than in a museum or university. He was a direct descendant of the great Mazzini whose faithfulness to an ideal has given modern Italy her unity.

"You will take care of the house?"

Zita nodded her head; she knew what her brother meant.

"You might clean these—there are one or two out of the common." He handed her some ancient coins, still embedded in soil and cement. Zita took the coins in her hand. "And if the Signore comes to the house, tell him. . . ."

Zita's exclamation stopped him. "Ma, Salvatore!" Her eyes dropped.

"It will only be to leave a packet for me—he won't hurt you, baby."

Zita tried to laugh, but failed because of her desire and yet her reluctance to tell him about the Signore.

Little more was said. Salvatore gave himself over to a sound sleep. His mid-day sleep was as necessary to him as his food. A Sicilian can live on surprisingly little if he gets plenty of sleep and sunshine.

When they returned to the city, an evening light was bestowing upon it a radiant charm, a spiritual calm graced its ancient outlines. The sulphur city of discontent and "mala gente" was a fair Jerusalem, golden and immortal. Their walk was a long one and they had no donkeys to carry them, but they were both young and Zita at least was tireless.

Familiar classic sites served for milestones. Their backs were to the tideless sea, which formed a background for the temples, which were begun by the tyrant Theron in the days when Acragas was a city of fashion and renown. Before them lay the long hill, which wound its way up to the city. It was close upon sundown when they neared its wall, where little farms cluster beneath its shelter, farms which look curiously Eastern to northern eyes.

The brother and sister had exchanged many greetings with neighbours, who passed them riding on their well-conditioned animals, for "the orphans," as they were called, were favourites both in the country and in the town. Their festa table was often graced by a gift from a generous farmer's wife or the prosperous proprietor of a patisseria. They possessed qualities which command affection, and they were orphans, which in Sicily means that they were the children of every mother's heart.

They had talked little to one another. Salvatore was tongue-tied because Zita had to be told something which he did not know how to tell her, and Zita was so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she was ignorant of how silent she had been.

"I will tell her to-morrow night, when I return," Salvatore kept saying to himself. "Nothing can be done until to-morrow." He heaved a sigh, well content to postpone the unpleasant duty.

"What a deep sigh, Salvatore mio! Are you very tired?"

"What did you say?" he asked anxiously. They were speaking Sicilian. As a rule Salvatore made Zita speak

Italian, even when they were alone together; it was part of her education.

"You give such a deep sigh, fratello mio."

"I was thinking."

Zita looked at him with concern. "Salvatore, you have not been so well lately. What troubles you?" She slipped her hand in his, country fashion.

"The future, little sister—our future."

"After death, Salvatore?"

He laughed. "Not so serious as that, baby."

"Then why trouble? The Blessed Virgin keeps a mother's eye on all orphans. It is because you are overtired—you work too late; give over your night studies for a little time, Salvatore."

"No, no, baby, I am not overworking. The hill is steep and I was thinking while I walked."

Zita held his hand more closely. "You know, fratello mio, you are my dear world. When you sigh it trembles, when you look too tired or too grave it grows cold and I am afraid. Often, when I have been asleep for many hours, I wake and hear your pen write, write, writing, and the leaves of your big museum books turn, turn, turning. It is true, Salvatore."

"Some day, piccola donna, I shall not need to burn the midnight oil."

"Sperro di si, fratello mio."

They were separated by a man guiding a strong ass laden with two jars, which filled the panniers hanging from its sides. They had come to a part of the road where such a sight is very usual, for the majority of householders in Girgenti have to go down the hill to fetch water each night from the well. Women go to it in threes and fours, carrying their water-pitchers on their heads, cheap household utensils of a pure classic form.

As Salvatore caught sight of the jars, he started as though he had never seen a donkey carrying water before.

He stopped and gazed at them as if he expected to see some strange object jump out of the jars. Then pulling himself together he talked cheerfully to Zita as they mounted to the long street of the town.

When they got home Zita cooked their evening meal of polenta and fried artichokes. After it was eaten Salvatore devoted himself to his studies, while Zita darned his socks. Their cottage was so small that their Mass clothes had to be kept in a tin box and the antiques which they had for sale in a gaily-painted wooden one, a typical Sicilian chest.

Salvatore slept on a couch which he had made for himself in the room which served them for kitchen and living room.

When Zita began to nod over her work, Salvatore sent her to bed. Many hours after she was asleep, he could still be seen in the quiet cottage, seated at the wooden table, with his books in front of him and his thoughts far away from his surroundings. He was a serious youth, this son of modern Girgenti; it could not be said of him, as the great Empedocles said of his ancestors, that the Acragantines built their houses as if they were to live for ever, but gave themselves up to pleasure and luxuries as if they were to die to-morrow.

CHAPTER II

In the afternoon of the following day a motor-car stopped at the Casa Salvatore. Everyone in the district and in the city knew the cottage by that name.

Zita answered the loud knock at her door with throbbing pulses and nervous eyes. Cars were not common in Girgenti—indeed, there was only one besides that of "il Signore," whose work often necessitated long excursions across the Island. The Government supplied him with the car and petrol. It had stopped at her door before.

Il Signore smiled at Zita's troubled face as he held out the packet which Salvatore had mentioned. Whatever it was, it was carefully done up in a tin box, which had once held cigarettes.

"Put that safely away, little Zita, and then turn the key in your door and come along with me." He spoke authoritatively.

"Prego, Signore," Zita shrank back into the house.

"Do as you are told," he said, almost sternly. "Salvatore is expecting us. I will drive you to Empedocle, where he will meet us. He is to come on there from Monserrato."

Zita still hesitated and dropped her eyes.

"Don't you want a drive on this fine day?"

Zita had never been in an automobile in her life, so of course she wanted a drive. Besides, the cottage was dull and until Salvatore returned she must sit in it.

"You know quite well, little Zita, that you are dying to come. I won't throw you out and I have brought a coat. You will require it later on."

"Oh no, Signore!" The coat alarmed Zita; it was the coat of a great lady; it was not for her.

"Then come as you are, until we are out of the town. Yes, that will be best. I will call at the druggist and tell him that I am taking you to your brother, who requires some magnesia for his work. Signor Naldo will tell everyone else." He laughed.

Zita still deliberated. It was a strange thing to do, to drive in an automobile with a gentleman all alone, but what could she do? Was Salvatore willing for her to do it? Had he agreed?

"Come along, child—get in."

Zita felt herself lifted quickly into the motor, but to her relief the Signore did not get in beside her; he sat by himself in the driver's front seat. As they whirled through the town, the girl did not see a single face she knew; being siesta hour almost everyone was asleep and the houses were shut. There was not even a dog in the street. The druggist's was closed.

"There is no need to go in," the Signore said. "Tongues won't wag, carissima."

"Ma, Signore, my brother's magnesia."

The signore did not answer. He only drove the car still faster. Probably he had not heard her and Zita could make no further protest.

As soon as they had left the city, the splendour of the sunshine and the pleasure of rushing through the air in so new and wonderful a manner, drove all doubts and apprehensions from her mind. She felt like a princess in a fairy story. It was exciting to her young blood to rush past all the places she knew so well, just as if they all lay close together, while she knew that they lay miles and miles apart. Her spirits rose with leaps and bounds. The speed and the fresh air went to her head; the glory of the day rushed through her veins like wine, it dazzled her senses. The light and the speed and the beauty of the laughing land were enough to intoxicate anyone. It seemed to Zita that Heaven could offer her no greater pleasure, and her pleasure was not spoilt by any attention from the Signore, who was so engrossed in his car, that he seemed to have forgotten her presence.

They passed many beautiful and ancient things, for the landscape is classic, every step of it, from high Girgenti to the dead city in the plain, and beyond, where the blue ocean travels to the very walls of Carthage.

Soon the way became less familiar to Zita, for they were nearing the port and she had only once been to Porto Empedocle. Mules laden with yellow blocks of sulphur made an unending procession as they wound their way from the mining station to the town.

At the outskirts of the town, the Signore stopped the car at the door of a very ordinary, quiet-looking house, a little off the main thoroughfare. After a rapid glance up and down the street, he jumped out of the car and opened its door for Zita. Immediately all the fears which had been hushed and forgotten came to life again. Where was Salvatore? She looked at the Signore anxiously.

"Mio fratello?" was all she said.

He saw her anxiety. "I will go and find Salvatore. Come and have something to eat first—he won't be long."

"Grazie, Signore." Zita shook her head.

"What nonsense, puppidda mia! The drive has given me an appetite—you must be hungry too."

The Signore walked into the house. It was a small osteria (inn), yet no stranger would have thought so, but for the branch of dried olive leaves which it sported over the front door.

A good-natured-looking, heavy-stomached man instantly appeared. He greeted the Signore with a familiar and at the same time respectful "Buon giorno."

The Signore spoke a few words to him, which Zita did not hear, then making her go on in front of him, he hurried her upstairs to a room which had evidently been set apart for their use. The girl's southern intelligence took in every appointment of it. The blood rushed to her cheeks, but as she glanced at the table for the second time a sigh of relief came from her oppressed heart. There were three wine glasses, not two, standing on a brass tray, which also held a bottle of Marsala. Evidently the landlord knew that Salvatore was expected. A flat cake, decorated with candied fruit, and some tangerine oranges, were placed beside the wine. A very tempting repast for a poor girl, who seldom enjoyed the luxury of a sweetmeat. A small white cloth was spread over the coloured one of tinselled tapestry; heavy curtains, draped in Spanish fashion, darkened the room.

When the door was shut, the Signore threw himself down on the couch which occupied a large portion of the pretentiously furnished room.

"Come and sit beside me, puppidda mia, and tell me if you enjoyed the ride."

He put his arm round the girl's waist and drew her reluctantly to him.

"No, sit down and talk to me. Don't stand looking at me with solemn eyes. I won't bite, although you are a tempting morsel." He had pulled off her headkerchief and looked admiringly at her hair. As he repeated the words, "How did you enjoy the drive?" Zita was sitting beside him like a quivering bird. "Was it exciting?"

"Si, Signore, it was wonderful; it was like Heaven."

"You were not afraid?"

Her eyes scorned the idea.

He put his hand on her hair. "I should like to see all this hair of yours hanging down, piccola Madonnina." His eyes caressed the dark head.

Zita was tongue-tied and embarrassed.

"May I see it all down some day if I am very kind? And then I will make a picture of you, my unhappy, grave Madonnina."

"No, no, Signore! The girl shrank from him but he held her by her hands.

"If you look so afraid and shrink from me, Zita mia, I will punish you as you deserve." He held her closer to him and looked down into her distressed face. The girl had never looked more beautiful.

"You see, I could kiss you as often as I chose, puppidda mia, but I won't—not until you allow me to, not until you want me to." He covered one of the girl's breasts with his right hand. It was perfectly moulded and virginally firm. It was not the first time that his hands had tarnished innocence and given birth to desires.

"I will not offer you an undesired kiss, Madonnina," he said. "I will give you this instead." He drew from his pocket a coral necklace; each bead was delicately cut so as to represent a ripe raspberry. He tried to fasten it round her neck, but Zita's quick hands prevented him.

"Prego, Signore, I cannot wear them." Her bent head prevented him slipping the beads under her chin. "Senta, Signore," she said more brightly, "I wear a string of coral. I do not require your gift, ma grazie." She pulled out her beads, which were hidden by her dress.

"But that is only peasant's coral. This is pigeon-blood, the very tone of your ripe lips."

"No, no, Signore! I do not accept presents."

"Ma, this is no present. I thought they would suit your white throat and crimson lips; wear them, Madonnina, just to give me pleasure. You know I love looking at pretty things and I have no sister to give them to."

The girl looked at them. She appreciated their beauty, for coral has always been much prized and understood in Sicily. Such blood-red coral is rare and beautiful; it is imported from far seas. Besides, the workmanship of the beads made it unique.

"It is very costly, Signore, and worthy of our museum."

"I paid nothing for it. I could have convicted a youth of theft; he was in my power. His mother brought me this, her last family relic, to buy him off."

"Povera Donna!" Zita's eyes looked tenderly at the beautiful beads. She was not accusing the Signore, merely visualising the mother's agony.

"Don't they look as if juice would burst from them if you pricked them?" he said.

Zita's thoughts were still with the boy's mother. "Povera donna," she said again, "povera donna."

"Perbacco, carina, but they will be happier round your white throat. Pretty things do not like to be hidden away in a poor woman's house, and they hate to be worn by ugly people. Things have feelings, Zitina, like ourselves."

" Si, si, Signore."

The girl did not follow his meaning, but politeness to her superiors made her agree with him. Politeness in a Sicilian is almost as great a force as it is in a Japanese. Politeness made it impossible for Zita to openly resent the

Signore's terms of endearment or his everyday attentions to her. In Sicily, an employer will often speak affectionately to his employees and to their children. At one moment the Signore made the girl feel that she was only, in his eyes, her brother's young sister, a mere child in years; at another, she was the woman he desired and was hunting.

Because Zita did not disagree with the Signore, he said coaxingly, "Then wear them. Take off these beads and put on mine. Look, yours are quite brown beside my pigeon's blood." He had unfastened the beads from the girl's neck; he held up both strings in his hands. The ones she had refused made her own look ugly and ill-coloured, but with jealous fingers she took them quickly from his hand.

"Prego, Signore, my dead mother gave them to me—she saved up so long for them."

Tears sprang to her eyes. What would her mother think of her child if she could see her seated beside a Signore, whose eyes made her dawning womanhood ashamed? Would her mother petition the Blessed Virgin to help her helpless child? Her wet eyes were tragic. The Signore wiped them with his linen handkerchief and put the rejected corals back into his pocket. After lunch the girl would probably have accepted them! he had offered them too soon.

When her eyes were dried and she was smilling again—for the Signore had treated her like a fractious baby, while he wiped away her tears—he bent his head and put his lips close to hers.

"Now won't you give me a kiss and say I am forgiven? I never meant to hurt your feelings. Well, if you are shy, let me kiss your eyes, let me teach you how to kiss."

Zita was a true child of the south, eager for love and affection. Her senses were battling against her fear of his demands. But to allow any man to kiss her or to ever speak of love to her before marriage was a thing unthinkable, a disgrace.

She sprang from him like a young animal freed from a trap. Had her swift prayer been answered? New energy had come to her.

"No, Signore, mai, mai!" She struggled to her feet.

As long as his hands caressed her her energy deserted her, resistance was benumbed; beyond his reach and the physical influence of his passion she could act and think. With flaming eyes she faced him bravely.

"Tell me, Signore, where is my brother? Where is Salvatore? Why is he not here to protect me?"

The Signore shook his head; her anger amused him. "I do not know where he is." As he spoke, he sprang from the couch and blocked the door; if she attempted to pass him he would take her in his arms. Panting, she faced him again.

"Why did you bring me here, Signore? Was it to meet Salvatore, or was it for your pleasure?"

"For my pleasure and for your pleasure too, angry little Zita! When I have taught you how sweet love can be, you will smile again and forget those fears. This is to be our love-birds' nest, puppidda mia."

The girl's face became chalk-white; she gave a low cry. "Madonna mia, why did I come here? Why did I come here?"

The room began to move up and down. She felt faint; in another moment she would indeed be at his mercy. She had to support herself by holding on to the table.

The Signore poured out a glass of Marsala and told her to drink it. Zita had only drunk the cheap red wine bought at the country farms, and always mixed with water; no Sicilian ever drinks plain wine. She drank some Marsala eagerly; she would have drunk anything to steady her tottering limbs and give her power to act and to think. The wine did restore her; the faintness passed.

"I want Salvatore." She said the words as a child might have said them. "Take me to Salvatore."

"This is all nonsense," he said gently. "All women feel like this until love has shown them that there is nothing to fear. Dear little girl, I will be so good to you—won't you let me be your big and devoted lover?"

"Non mai!" she cried wildly. "You are cruel, Signore, you know a good girl cannot have a lover; you know that I am virtuous." Tears poured down Zita's cheeks.

The Signore's fingers wiped them away. "You dear little woman, you want me and my love; you are only afraid, afraid of other people, child; you are not afraid of me."

The wine was by this time surging through the girl's veins; it had stopped her faintness, but it was making her feel very weak, almost as helpless as when she was faint. If he took her in his arms now, what could she do? Oh, Mother in Heaven! If only it was not wrong to lay her heavy head on his shoulder and go to sleep!

The Signore stood silently beside her. He knew what was happening; he saw the stern expression on the young face relaxing; he saw that resistance was almost over, the battle almost won.

Tenderly he kissed her wet cheek. As a lover he was perfect. The girl was refined and sensitive; with her passion must be devoid of grossness. Zita looked up at him with heavy eyes. He was quite right—for the moment resistance was impossible. But it was only for a moment. With one of those sudden clearings of the brain and whole system, which is totally inexplicable, every trace of wine-languor suddenly left Zita. Her head lost its heaviness and her energies became vitalised. With extraordinary clarity her wits began to work. Her prayer had been answered; she had been shown the way.

The Signore was kissing her; she must let him kiss her again—yes, kiss her and caress her.

She looked up at him with inviting eyes. "Salvatore will come," she said, "and if he comes, he will kill us."

"No, no, gioia mia, we are safe. There is only you and I, our two selves in the whole world. This little room will only hold Love, our Love, all this afternoon, donna mia." He kissed her soft throat as he murmured the words in her ear.

"No, no," she said pleadingly, "I am afraid. See that Salvatore is not near." Her eyes showed no shrinking, only alarm for their safety. "He will certainly kill us, Signore."

"I will go and make everything secure, mio dolce amore, I will tell the padrone that I am engaged." He laughed happily, as he held her closely to him. "My timid little robin, soon you will laugh at all your fears. Now I will go, if you will promise to be quite at rest with me and enjoy all the beautiful gifts of love. Little woman, you don't know what wonderful things love can do."

Zita smiled. Her brain was working furiously, but he must not know; he must go and look for Salvatore; she must play her part.

She watched his movements. It was obvious that he did not trust her for he took the key out of the inside of the door and locked it behind him from the outside. She heard him run down the stairs; in a very few minutes he would return to claim his promise.

She flew to the window. She must jump out even if she broke all her limbs in doing so. She opened it quietly. If he was on the doorstep he would look up and see her, but she would jump all the same. When the window was opened to its fullest, she put out her head and shoulders.

A long cart piled high with donax reeds was drawing close to the inn. She must wait until it passed her window, for the reeds would reach almost to the balcony. Her fears left no time for doubts. Now was her chance, the Blessed Virgin had sent this means of escape. She scrambled out on to the small balcony and waited until the cart came under it, then with the lightness of youth she poised herself for one moment on its railings and leaped on to the load of donax reeds.

The man who was driving the cart was suddenly aroused from his reverie, which he was accompanying with the music of a long reed flute. What he saw was a girl, hatless and excited, suddenly drop like a bolt from the blue on to his load of reeds.

"Prego, Signore, save me! Hide me under your rain-sheet, cover me quickly."

The youth took the rain-sheet, which he used for his horse in the evenings in bad weather, and without speaking a word or waiting for a minute, he threw it over the girl, who lay panting and speechless. When youth is in distress, a Sicilian does not stop to enquire what is right and what is wrong; when it pleads for help it receives it. The young man had not seen how beautiful his burden was, but it was young. Without more ado, they journeyed on, up the narrow street and out of the town and all the while Zita lay trembling and thankful, while the carter played gaily on his pipe. Intrigue is instinctive to all Sicilians; while he played, he wondered what part he had filled in a strange romance.

When they were beyond the outskirts of the town and no-one seemed to trouble them, he stopped his playing and with the familiar Italian expression, "Mi scusi," he lifted the storm-sheet and peeped at the hidden girl.

"Signorina," he said, "where do you wish to go to? We have now left the town."

"To Girgenti, prego, Signor, e grazie, mille grazie."

The youth laughed. "Mi displace, but I am not going to Girgenti."

"How near do you go, Signor?"

"I can take you a good part of the way."

Zita's dark head was now uncovered. He saw her face for the first time. A new heaven and a new earth seemed suddenly opened to him. He was gazing into young eyes which held both fear and gratitude; he was listening to words spoken by lips whose perfection he had never imagined.

"Grazie, grazie, Signor," she said again. "I was in great danger . . . you saved me . . ." she hesitated " . . . Yes, I was in terrible danger. If you had not been passing, I should have jumped to the ground."

"What good fortune was mine, Signorina! Where are you going to now?" The young man's eyes were devoutly respectful.

"To the Casa Salvatore, my brother's house in Girgenti, my home."

He had mentioned the point in the road where their ways must part. "Can you walk so far alone?"

"Gia, gia." She spoke eagerly, although in truth both the wine she had drunk and the strain she had endured made her feel unusually tired. Her limbs and head felt heavy, but if she might rest on the cart until their ways parted, she could then manage the walk.

All she realised at present was the fact that she was not returning home a shamed and disgraced woman. She had tricked and outwitted the Signore. Shame she certainly felt for her lack of frankness with Salvatore. For weeks and weeks past she had known that the Signore was making love to her in a thousand clever and subtle ways. In Sicily it is the unspoken language which feeds the heart and in which vows are exchanged. The Signore had spoken these things of the heart to her when he was busy with her brother, he had told them while she sat all alone under the dark carob tree, industriously knitting. Did not all this mean that she ought to have told Salvatore?

Now she knew, as she lay on the donax reeds, that she had been punished, that this would never have happened if she had told Salvatore what she knew to be the truth, that the Signore had been hunting her and desiring her, ever since he had set eyes on her, that he had probably thought that her assumption of virtue was merely a part of a woman's wiles. If she had been a really modest girl, she would have told her brother. The Signore had trusted to that. He had meant to trap her and capture her. The three glasses set out on the inn table had been a blind. He had never expected Salvatore; he had sent him off on a long journey to keep him out of the way. The Signore had taken it for granted that she really cared for him and that she would willingly give herself to him if Salvatore never knew.

The shame of the whole thing made her angrier with herself than she was with the Signore. He was just like all other men; if he believed a girl was good, he would behave respectfully to her; if he thought she was light and without virtue he would take from her what pleasure he could. Yes, he had thought she would accept his love and hide the fact from her brother, and even now, how dared she tell Salvatore? For he would certainly seek his revenge. Brothers have killed men for smaller insults offered to their sisters. Besides, even if her brother only quarrelled with him they would be homeless.

There was only one thing to do—keep the shame and horror of the thing to herself and never let the Signore speak to her again, except in Salvatore's presence.

Her brain was clearing and her nerves were less disturbed. She could look back on the scene with calmer reasoning. She had saved herself by the miraculous intervention of Providence, the Blessed Virgin had helped her, the cart had been sent at the right moment. She would again help her to reach her home before Salvatore returned.

To cleanse her memory of all that defiled it she said her prayers. They restored her self-respect and calmed her eyes; she could look at clear hills without shame.

Feeling more courageous, she pushed back the heavy rain-sheet and sat upright. The driver had seated himself on the shaft of the waggon. She could look down at him unperceived. He was young and good-looking and well-dressed. It was nice of him to sit on the shaft while she rested above; the act showed a consideration for her distress. As she crept to the edge of the donax reeds so as to see him better, he looked up. Their eyes met, their lips smiled. They were delightfully young.

"Have you rested?" he asked respectfully.

"Si, si, Signor, and I owe you a thousand thanks. You saved me; I was in great trouble."

"So I imagined." He spoke gravely, but a smile lit up his expressive Sicilian eyes.

"I was locked into a room, and I could not get out and I had to be back in Girgenti by dark, before my brother gets home. I have the key of the house."

"Were you naughty?" he asked. "Were you locked up as a punishment?"

"No, no, Signor. I had only been unwise." Her eyes were grave.

He had used the word "cattiva," which has a wider meaning than naughty or wicked. His use of the word implied, had she been childishly naughty?

"I only blame myself for my want of experience." Zita spoke with the habitual dignity of her race.

"Sacramento! Then you were in real distress?" He got up from his low seat and climbed to the top of the donax reeds. "Tell me," he said sympathetically, "what would you have done if my cart had not passed?"

"I should have jumped from the window into the street." Her eyes dropped under his gaze; she looked ashamed.

"Poverina," he said, "I understand."

"My brother must never know; he would . . ." she paused. "Oh, he must never know! You saved me, Signor, so he need never know—I shall reach home in time."

"Grazie a Dio, I was passing!" he said. "But I'd kill him and save your brother."

"No, no," she said impulsively. "Perhaps it was my fault. I believed he was taking me to my brother; he said

Salvatore expected us in the port. I ought to have been wiser, I ought to have known."

"You were brave, Signorina."

"I was desperate, Signor."

"Tell me his name," he said, "and I will kill him."

The girl's simplicity and purity appealed to his romantic nature and fired his southern blood. He was already longing to fight a duel for her sake. Her half-told story was complete in his vision.

Zita threw back her head. "Non mai, Signor. Let me forget, do not ask to know his name. All I desire is to forget."

"Per certo, Signorina, you must forget. Let others remember, let others teach him the lesson he deserves."

Even in Sicily a girl does not drop down on your cart like a bolt from the blue every day to petition your help. And such a girl! The first fine flame of rapture leaped through his veins.

The girl was deliciously serious, and if the youth did not understand her classic type as the Signore did, he know that she was beautiful. He longed to meet the man who had placed her in her present predicament; his senses told him that her virtue was no pose. He also knew his own race and the temperament of its people; the girl at his side was not a safety-match; and now that she was in his care it behooved him to keep his own senses cool and his speech within reason. To play his flute would be safer than talking to a girl with melting eyes and a laughing mouth.

"Do you like the music of the pipe, Signorina?" he asked modestly. "It is very simple but it may pass the time."

"Gia, gia, I like it very much. You were playing something from 'Cavalleria Rusticana'—I heard it."

He took up his pipe. "I will play an older Sicilian air this time."

Her eyes smiled; she was familiar with it. She sang it softly to the flute accompaniment. It was one of the peasant-songs which the women sing while they beat the wheat on the threshing floors. Zita's young voice was true and clear. The pipe ceased for a moment.

"You sing, Signorina?"

"No, Signor, I wish I could."

"Then what do you call the noise you were making? I call it singing."

Zita laughed and when she laughed her love of laughter delighted the youth. Was ever a girl so winsome? Was ever beauty so merry and yet so grave? He played again; this time it was the "Caro nome" from "Rigoletto."

"Prego, Signorina," he said respectfully, "make that noise again, and a little louder this time, if you please."

His lips were lifted from his pipe. Zita shook her head.

"Prego, Signorina," he said, "make it again." He did not go on playing until she hummed the air.

All Sicilians who have any voice at all have an instinctive knowledge of how to produce it; a carter of manure uses his voice like an operatic singer. Zita forgot her shyness and sang the song as she felt it ought to be sung.

"Grazie," the youth said, when he had finished playing her accompaniment. "If you can't sing, there will be no birds in paradise."

Zita took his remark for what it was worth. In Sicily it is seldom spoken compliments which make a girl's heart beat quicker.

She had lost herself in the enjoyment of the music. The fresh air, her high seat on the reeds and the good companionship of her unknown friend had driven away all unhappiness from her mind.

When they came to the parting of their ways, she felt as if she were saying good-bye to a friend instead of to a youth whom she had never seen before. As a reward for his timely services and good conduct, he was permitted to put his arm tightly round her slim waist and swing her down from the high pile of reeds to the long shaft of the cart.

When her feet were firmly planted on the ground she thanked him again and again. Her blushes delighted him more than her gracious words.

A Sicilian can fall in love with the twinkling of an eye. Sardo Fontana had already given his heart to Zita for ever. The thing was complete and overmastering from the first moment. Zita was now his "adorata," and let no northern mind imagine that such a love is a thing to be laughed at or to be thought of as chaff before the wind. As light comes into a room, so love comes into a Sicilian's heart.

Sardo, like a young Apollo, had played many songs on his pipe to imaginary girls and worshipped a hundred ideals of the girl-wife who would one day be the mother of his sons—for that is the great ideal, the woman who is to be the mother of his sons, the woman who is to give him children. A childless home is no home to an Italian or Sicilian. Zita was now to be that woman; she was his ideal in human form. In his mind she would be his "adorata," his joy, his guardian angel, his sweet treasure—but it is a travesty to translate all the beautiful expressions which Sardo would apply to Zita. In crude English his devout passion becomes ludicrous.

They parted regretfully, Zita because she had now to walk all alone and it was many miles, and Sardo because the gladness of the day was in the girl's eyes and they were leaving him. When would he see her again? He did not allow himself to think that he would never see her again, for in Sicily where there is true love, there is a way. He dared not because he knew of her awful adventure suggest a meeting; if he did she might imagine that he thought lightly of her. The utmost he could do was to ask her, in a very deferential voice, to which church she went on Sundays.

Having learnt that fact there was nothing to prevent him going to the same church.

He watched the girl walk swiftly away, then kissing the neck of his mare because of its sex, he jumped up on to the shaft of his cart and cried, "Amonene amonene" (Let us go together).

CHAPTER III

Fate or the Virgin was kind to Zita, for she arrived home quite an hour before Salvatore returned from his work. Her long walk had seemed unending, for very soon her pleasant ride on the donax reeds had been driven from her thoughts by her increasing anxiety to reach home before her brother's return. Every incident of the day had danced before her eyes; each persuasive tone of the Signore's voice had rung in her ears. A hundred times the ominous sound of the door key turning in the lock had broken the country stillness. The shame of it all and the vulgarity of the episode had increased, until her nerves were at breaking point when she reached her front door.

To her tired feet the road she had travelled over in so short a time in the car had seemed eternal. But, thanks be to God! Salvatore had not returned; the cottage was undisturbed.

It seemed strange that things should be so normal. She set about preparing the evening meal. When it was ready Salvatore appeared. He did not think it necessary to ask Zita if she had been out; he knew that unless it was with him, she never left their home.

When the dish of gnocchi was on the table and they were both seated, Salvatore said nervously, "Zita! I have something to tell you, but let us finish our supper first."

Zita's heart seemed to stop beating. Her brother's face was grave—had he heard? Yes, surely he knew.

"Fratello mio, is it very awful?" Her words were spoken with a brave effort of self-control.

"It depends upon what you consider awful."

"By your voice, Salvatore, I might think one of us had committed a crime."

Salvatore looked up quickly. The girl's words hit him. There was silence while they ate their gnocchi with an industry and quickness which would have amused a foreigner. They belonged to the least greedy nation in Europe; but what few good meals Sicilians have per week, they eat eagerly and with the appearance of greed. Gnocchi is made of maize, appetisingly cooked with a little cheese and butter. When the fact is borne in mind that a full day's work was well paid if the labourer received one franc forty per day, it goes without saying that a good dinner consisted of one dish.

Salvatore drank some wine, probably less than a farthing's worth. Zita did not take any—the heady Marsala had been more than enough for one day! When her brother had emptied his glass, Zita said:

"Now tell me, fratello mio, your secret."

"Per certo, it is a secret, Zita, and you must keep it."

"Do I ever go to the well, Salvatore?" (The well is the meeting-place of the gossips.)

"No, no!" He held out his hand, by way of apology.

"Tell me, then, what makes you so grave."

"You must know, baby, and yet I would like to spare you."

"You are not going to leave me, Salvatore?" Her words were a cry.

"No, baby, where I go you go. When I leave Girgenti you will go with me."

"Ma, Salvatore, how can we leave Girgenti?"

"I did not say we were going to leave our home to-night. If I make some money, baby, would you like to see the Continent?"

"Make money?" Her eyes expressed wonder. What did his words mean? Miracles do not happen to everyday people.

"Yes, make money. I have been working hard for four years. All I can make of digging will never take us out of this little town; it will never pay for my fees at the University; it scarcely feeds us."

It was the old dream, the old desire! Zita thought that lately he had resigned himself to his provincial occupation.

"I have found a way with the Signore's help to make some money."

"Tell me what way you have found to make money?" His words struck her. The Signore!

"Senta! One month ago I found two Greek urns; they belong to the best period of Greek Art."

"Si, si!" Zita grew impatient. What had Greek vases to do with his story?"

"They are worth a large sum of money."

"How much, Salvatore?"

"Some thousands of lire, if properly sold, I suppose."

Zita's eyes grew darker, her lips parted in wonder.

"The urns are mine," Salvatore said. "I found them." His words were harsh.

"Yes, Salvatore, you have found many things, but——"

"But nothing is mine, you are going to say, until it is given to me by the museum authorities. Well, I am going to keep these two Greek urns; the Signore is going to sell them for me to some wealthy American on the Continent."

Zita's eyes expressed an unspoken horror; she shrank in her clothes; her body felt small inside them. Some dreadful change had come to Salvatore.

"If I hadn't found them, no museum would be any the poorer; for two thousand years they have lain just where I found them. If some wealthy American buys them, their beauty will be widely appreciated and they will benefit the world more than if they were shut up in a museum."

"Si, si, but that does not make your action the less dishonest. You must not do it, you cannot do it! You are an honest man! We are not starving, fratello mio!"

"I want money, the urns are mine! Doesn't the land belong to me and to you just as much as to the Government? We are the Government; we are taxed for every mortal thing we eat and possess. The Government of the country is the taxpayers. I have as much right to what I find in the land as the King himself. He would agree to that; he is a reasonable man."

"Santa Madre!" Zita cried. "Have you lost your senses? Is it too much book-learning?"

"Perhaps I have just come into them. I dig and dig and dig, and what am I paid? One lira and a half per day. These urns, if taken to the authorities, would only enrich the museums, which as you know are only visited by forestieri. Now I have got this chance I mean to take it. Such a discovery was never dreamed of. They must have been hidden for safety; they are fine examples of the urns which were bestowed upon the Olympic champions."

"How are you going to sell them? Where are you going to keep them?" Zita was trembling. The very idea that her brother could contemplate dishonesty had shaken her belief in human nature; it had thrown her mind into a state of chaos.

"That is what I want to tell you," he said. "They are very tall and big," he indicated their height from the level of the floor. "They are in perfect condition; they are panathenaic vases, trophies which were made for ornament, not for domestic use. There is nothing like them in any of our museums."

Zita was listening. Salvatore saw her anxiety, but ignored it.

"I am going to bring them here after sundown in two pig-skins from the well. No-one will look twice at them; they will be on a donkey's back like any other water-jars." He paused and then said, "There will be no risk."

"And when you get them here, Salvatore?"

"I am going to dig a hole in the floor in front of the stove."

"You are going to bring them to our house! Hide your stolen urns under the very hearth by which our mother sat when she nursed us at her knees!" Zita's words rang out in protest. Her sobs almost choked her words. "Oh, Salvatore mio, Salvatore mio, say you do not mean it!" She raised her tear-stormed eyes to his; she was at his knees. "You are only frightening me! Our mother's house must not become a den of thieves. Tell me quickly, Salvatore—say that it is not true, say that it is only a joke to frighten your foolish Zita! You would not make a Mazzini a thief!"

He tried to push her away, to raise her to her feet. "Little sister," he said, "you speak extravagantly. Our father's name will suffer no dishonour. Out of all the things that I have dug up and handed over to the museum, I have only kept these two urns."

"Yes, Salvatore, your hands have been clean, your honour unstained. Every man and woman respects you, every citizen of Girgenti honours you. But you will be an honest man no longer, the Casa Salvatore will not deserve our neighbour's respect." She took his hands in hers. "While they are still clean, let me kiss them, Salvatore mio, while they are still worthy of our father's name. And oh, what is money without self-respect? What is money compared to our happiness? And we are happy now."

"What is self-respect or anything else worth to-day, without money?" he said bitterly. "And after all I only want enough to give me my chance in life, enough to pay for the education to which my abilities entitle me. Every man has a right to that."

"Salvatore, have you then ceased to believe that the good God gives us all we deserve, all that in His wisdom He considers good for us? Have you forgotten our mother's prayers, her teachings?"

"Tell me, Zita, why does God consider that the Signor Giacomo Amadei, who is scarcely ever sober and whose daughters have run away to America because of his wickedness and bad temper, should own the wealthiest sulphur mines in Sicily? Why should he have a thousand lire for every centesimo I have ever earned? He does no work, he lives on the labour of ill-fed workers."

"He has a bad heart, Salvatore mio. God has given you a good one. Besides, God has given poor Signor Amadei cross-eyes and a crimson nose and bent legs." Zita's attempt at mirth was more tearful than her weeping.

Salvatore kissed her. "You will soon forget that the urns are here, baby. Some boards and my beg-rug will cover the place where they lie and when the Signore has found an American millionaire we will take them away."

"Ah!" she cried. "It is the Signore's doing—he has persuaded you!" Zita was on her feet, her slim body was trembling; her eyes, which one moment before had been full of tears, were burning like two live coals in her pale face. "Yes, it is all the Signore's doing," she cried. Her voice rang through the cottage.

"You are always ready to believe ill of the Signore," he said. "Where should we be without him? He has been generous, he has done you no harm."

"Grazie a Dio," she said gravely, "he has done me no harm. But please, please do not trust him; he is a fox; he will get you into trouble and then leave you to get out of it as best you can."

"Why do you hate the Signore?"

"Because . . ." she hesitated, "I do not trust him. He is a Croat."

"Foolish girl!" Salvatore laughed.

His sister's words were childish and yet they had their meaning. The Signore was an Austrian subject; he had served in the Austrian Army. But to Zita he was worse than an Austrian, he was a Croat. In southern Italy and Sicily the word "Croat" has not the same significance as it has in Venice and in the Province of Venetia; yet even in Sicily, the word has an evil meaning, a nasty sound. To trust a Croat was to trust a fox in sheep's clothing, a servant of Austria.

"I may be foolish, Salvatore, but I wish to remain honest. I would rather you never saw the Signore again and that you lost your work than become a tool in his hands, for that is what you will be . . . his tool."

Salvatore's temper was rising. "Per Bacco!" he said. "You shall not say that again! You forget yourself. Call me any man's tool and you insult your father's son. A Croat's tool! Never!"

"Prego, fratello mio, forgive me. But it is true and you will remember what Zita told you when it is too late. If you dirty your hands with the Signore's work you will make yourself his slave; he will drill and order you about and steep you in still more dishonourable trades."

Salvatore sprang to his feet. "Go to bed!" he shouted. "Go to bed! This is my house; to-morrow night the urns are coming into it and I am going to dig their beds. Begone."

The brother and sister stood glaring at each other. Both of them had hot tempers and both of them were utterly wretched. It was the first time since he had grown to manhood that he had spoken roughly to her.

"If you want money so badly," Zita said, "I too know of a way to make it. I have my body; men call it beautiful. Let me sell it. It would be more honourable, for at least it is my own; it would not be making a thief of my father's son. You know that young women can always make money."

Salvatore raised his hand to strike her. She dropped quickly to the floor and so avoided the blow. His hand fell to his side. He stood motionless, looking at the quivering figure of the unhappy girl at his feet. The next moment Zita crept from the room.

Far into the night she lay listening to the noise of her brother's spade digging up the kitchen floor. She could hear the sound of soil being thrown up, for her bedroom lay just across the narrow passage which divided the two rooms.

When the bed for the urns was dug and the boards, which he had stored in readiness for their coming in his work-shop at the back of the cottage, were ingeniously placed over the hole, and the earth which had come out of it was put into two sacks, Salvatore sat down in his customary place at the table and stretching his arms out, buried his head on them. He was the most unhappy youth in Girgenti that night.

The first half of the Signore's dirty work was accomplished; already he felt that his honour was smirched, that his hands would never again be clean. He had actually raised his hand to strike Zita, the one thing on earth that was dearer to him than life itself!

He loved her a thousand times more for her horror of his dishonesty, for her pride in his name. He knew that she was not speaking wildly when she said that in her eyes to sell her body would be less dishonourable. And yet he was going to do the Signore's work. He was defying his conscience and hurting Zita. He was doing it because a man is ruled by a thousand desires and is driven by countless forces. Besides, he had gone too far to turn back; he had agreed to the Signore's plans, which had all seemed very simple and far less dishonourable than when he had heard them from Zita's lips.

The Signore had told him of instances where officials holding important positions had mixed themselves up in the illicit trade, both in Egypt and in Greece, and when the traffic was discovered the scandal was hushed up; the guilty parties went unpunished. When the Signore told Salvatore these things, and how all sorts of traps had to be set to catch the thieves, and stringent regulations laid down which the curio-dealers were compelled to obey, it did not seem to be a thing of much consequence if he took the two urns which he had found.

When Zita put her view of the case bluntly before him, the affair took on a different aspect. He saw himself a thief and a betrayer of the generous trust which the authorities had placed in him.

He was lying across the table, half asleep, his head still buried in his arms, when Zita crept into the room. The long braids of her hair hung on either side of her pale face; her neck and shoulders were bare; the string of red coral—the beads which the Signore had spoken of so slightingly—encircled her white throat. Zita's nightgown was a crochet-trimmed chemise which reached to her ankles.

Salvatore had not heard her footsteps; her feet were bare. She put one hand on his head. He was startled; his eyes questioned her.

"You want to say you are sorry, fratello mio? And I cannot sleep until we are friends." She kissed his worn face. "Won't you go to bed? It is almost time to get up."

Salvatore still looked at her. Her feet were powdered with the soil which he had left on the cottage floor. His little Gioconda was as gentle and soft-eyed as his anxious mother had always been. Like a penitent Magdalen she stood by his side, her liquid eyes asking for his forgiveness.

"Carina," he said, "carina mia, go to bed. Why are you not asleep?"

"If you will go to bed, I will go to sleep, Salvatore."

Even in her brother's eyes the girl was exquisite. How could his hand have been raised to strike her? The little Zita, whom he had nursed and cherished and starved himself to satisfy.

"You have forgiven me, baby? I was a savage."

Zita's smiling face was all the answer her brother needed. He knew that now as always he had only to ask for her forgiveness and all discord was wiped out.

She went back to bed, thankful that she had not told him of her miserable adventure; he looked unhappy enough without any additional anxiety. She must learn to manage her own affairs.

CHAPTER IV

Salvatore did not go to the farm the next day. He told Zita that he meant to spend the time in cleaning and mending his store of Greek antiques. It was now the height of the tourist season in Sicily and all that he mended and cleaned he sold readily to the visitors at the temples.

One end of the table which ran along the cottage wall close to the window was littered with amphoræ, votive vases and objects of Greek toilet tables, jewel-boxes and cosmetic jars; while in a separate heap at the other end there were the heads and bodies and feet of terracotta statuettes which in the sixth century B.C. had represented gods and goddesses.

Salvatore was busily engaged in putting together with his extraordinary delicacy of touch a toilet box made of terracotta. It was covered with a fine black glaze and the figures on it, of a deep red, showed that it belonged to a very good period of Greek art; they were beautifully formed. Unfortunately the lid was badly broken. To Salvatore, however, the word "unmendable" was unknown; when he had mended it no-one would be able to tell with the naked eye that it had ever been damaged. His hands could mend a butterfly and put together a smashed egg shell.

He was thus engaged when a knock came to the door; it was the knock of a foreigner, easily distinguishable by his sensitive ears.

"Please to enter," he cried out in English. He could not leave his seat at the minute without injuring his work.

With the lightness of almond blossom fluttering in a spring breeze, an English girl entered his kitchen workshop.

"La Primavera," he said to himself as he looked at her. The girl wore a white muslin frock and a panama hat. She was so fresh and fair and slim that if the poet-painter Botticelli had seen her as Salvatore saw her, he would have painted a second "La Primavera." Her arms were full of wild flowers which she had gathered near the temples; their rick yellow and purple brought a glow of colour into the room. To Salvatore the girl was not real; she was a vision, a dream of mystic womanhood. She had brought the fresh air of the hills and a fragrance of wild flowers into his room, which until her coming had smelt of hot glue.

"May I come in?" The girl spoke in nervous but correct Italian; each word was pronounced prettily and carefully.

Salvatore rose from his seat—the toilet-box must take its chance. Zita had gone with a neighbour to the public washing establishment to do her weekly washing; he must play her part as hostess.

"Prego, Signorina, command me," he said. Salvatore's manner was perfect. He was to the girl an artist in his workshop, not a peasant.

Her eyes fell on the terracottas; she looked eagerly at them. "I was told you sold small antiques." Her little stock of Italian was leaving her; she felt shy, for the youth was no ordinary vendor of spurious antiques.

"Si, si, Signorina, these are for sale when they are repaired."

"But I want to buy a Venus, a pure Greek one, if you please."

"Mi dispiace (I am sorry), Signorina," Salvatore shook his head; his eyes could not hold back their smiles.

"Oh, but you surely must have one! Look at all these things." She now spoke slowly in English; her schoolbook Italian was proving insufficient.

His English was better than her Italian, although grammatically she spoke fairly correctly. If she had been less shy she would have spoken better. Salvatore had studied English; it was necessary for the sale of antiques.

"I am sorry, Signorina," he said in English, "but I have no beautiful figures."

"Oh, you speak English!" she said, with a relieved smile.

"A very little, Signorina. I can understand more than I can pronounce, if you will speak not so quickly."

"Well, I want a statuette of a Venus, or one of those beautiful Greek dancing girls, just like the ones I have seen in the museums—or like the Greek lady with the fan—do you know the one I mean?"

"Piano, piano, Signorina! You speak too quickly."

The girl slowly repeated her words.

"Ma, Signorina, I have not got one. Such figures are rare in Sicily. The one you mean is of the pure Tanagra period; it was probably imported from Tanagra."

"But look at all these." She picked up the head of a goddess. "You have quantities of these, but they are so ugly, so crude. I want a really beautiful one, please."

"Si, si, Signorina, I understand. I am very sorry."

"Have you no figures of Greek girls, nothing classic in type and feeling?"

Salvatore shook his head.

"Why haven't you?" she asked.

"Because they are rare, Signorina. When we find them they go to the museums. Figures with movement and beauty are worth much money. There are many of these," his eyes indicated a pile of broken figures. "If they were not very numerous and in this condition I should not be permitted to sell them."

"Why did they make them like that, so lacking in beauty, when all the world loves beauty, and the Greeks could make such exquisite statues?"

"Tell me, Signorina, why does God not make every woman as fair as an asphodel? If you can tell me that, I will tell you why they made all these unbeautiful things."

Salvatore's eyes had expressed more than his words; they quickened the blood in her veins. In this little cottage she had discovered a true artist and one of the best-looking men she had ever seen in her life. He was more classic than any of the images he was mending.

"I am so disappointed," she said. "I wanted to buy a really beautiful Greek figure. I was sure you would have one."

Again Salvatore said, "I am sorry, Signorina, but Girgenti is not Tanagra. The figures found in Girgenti belong to an earlier period; they were made before the fine Tanagra artists were born. They are almost all votive figures made in stereotyped moulds; they do not represent beautiful ladies, but the goddesses. They are like the cheap figures of the Virgin and the saints which to-day are turned out in the factories, all from the same mould. They are not individual works of art."

"Oh, I understand," the girl said. "The beautiful ones are the works of artists, made for their beauty; these ugly things were offerings which the poor bought for the tombs and the temples."

"Si, si, Signorina, they are generally found in tombs, nearly all of them are anterior to the destruction of the city in B.C. 406. That is too early for the best work. If we could come across some which belonged to a later period, they would be more beautiful, more interesting."

"Would they?"

"Prego, Signorina, as art and the love of beauty developed the better figurines became more desired. The artists delighted in their work; Tanagra became famous for its figurines, which were so eagerly purchased that very few left Tanagra; one or two have reached Sicily, but at Girgenti"—he threw back his head—"they are so rarely found that they must go to the museums. You could not buy one, Signorina."

"And these?" The girl looked at a jumble of heads and feet and trunks of bodies on the table. "What are these?"

"These," he said, "are all from the ashpits outside the temples. They were thrown there by the priests to make room for new offerings, just as dead flowers are thrown out from the altar vases in our churches. Before they threw them out, they broke them, if they were not too lazy."

"Why had they to break them?"

"They had been used for sacred purposes; it was forbidden that they should be put to everyday use."

"So is that why they are all smashed?"

"The heads and the feet of the statuettes were made of solid terracotta, so they are nearly always perfect; the bodies were hollow."

The girl turned over the damaged gods and examined their faces critically. Salvatore watched her. She handled them as he liked objects of great age and beauty to be handled.

"They are all frightfully ugly," she said sadly, "ugly and archaic and not human at all."

He did not like to ask her to inspect any of the small jewel-cases and vases, for he thought that it would look as if he wanted her to buy some of them, which was far from his thoughts. All he wanted to do was to keep her in his cottage as long as possible.

"I saw some terracotta figurines in the Palermo Museum which looked as if they might be portraits of society women, the society beauties of the day."

"I know them; they belong to the fourth century, Signorina; they are Tanagra figures of the best period."

"And you can't help me to buy one in Sicily?"

"No, Signorina. And if I found one the authorities would not part with it: it would be dishonest to hold it back."

Salvatore blushed; he felt ashamed of his words.

"Then you show them all that you find—everything?"

Salvatore's eyes fell; the girl's words necessitated a lie. "What they already have or don't want, I may sell. Mi dispiace, Signorina, I cannot help you."

"Oh," the girl said, "how awfully honest you must be! I don't believe I could be so honourable. If I found a real treasure I believe I should keep it." Salvatore knew that she was speaking rashly; her personality and frankness denied her assertion.

His eyes expressed his disbelief in her capacity to be dishonest. "The English are honourable," he said gravely.

She laughed. "I hope we always deserve your good opinion; I feel sure I could not be as honest as you are."

For the first time in his life he could not look an honest person straight in the face. He knew himself to be a thief.

"I shouldn't steal a big thing," she said whimsically. "I don't want a huge cinerary urn or a statue of Jove or that great figure lying down on the plain, which looks as if it had grown since it fell. But if I found a little Venus or a necklace of ancient stones, I believe it would stick to my fingers; I should feel that I had a right to it. We had a saying as children, *Finding's keepings.*"

"A very beautiful necklace was found last year," he said. "It was extraordinarily perfect." He lifted up the terracotta jewel-case. "It was found inside a case just like this."

"Oh, how exciting! Did these little dishes really hold jewels? Where is the necklace now?"

Salvatore threw back his head.

"You don't know?"

"No. It was lost; it was a great mystery. Once more it is hidden from the world."

"This is beautiful," she said. She was handling the terracotta jewel-box. "The figures are full of movement and life. I never thought of looking at these things."

"Si, si, this is a fine specimen and you can study and learn much of ancient Greek life and fashion from these domestic objects."

"But you can't mend this?"

"Si, si, Signorina," he smiled reassuringly, "per certo."

"Then may I buy it?" The girl's eyes brightened; she was delighted. The desired Venus was almost forgotten; the foolishly fragile jewel-case was sufficient for the hour.

"No, Signorina." Salvatore shook his head; his voice was grave.

"Oh, but I do really want it. I thought you said all those things were for sale."

"You shall have it, Signorina, if you will call again in two days' time. It will then be ready for you."

"But you said I could not buy it, Signor Mazzini."

"Gia, gia, Signorina, I said so. It is true; you cannot buy it."

She looked at him for an explanation; already she knew that what the Sicilian does not say is what he really means.

"There are some things, Signorina, which money cannot buy, which can only be given. The piccola cassetta, which once adorned a Greek girl's dressing-table, is already yours. If I am not at home when you call, my sister will give it to you."

The girl did not speak. Something told her why the youth would not sell the box; he disliked the feeling of taking money from her after their personal conversation. It was bringing a business element into the situation, which had been strangely devoid of it. She was puzzled to know what to do. He was obviously very poor, but she could not offer to buy any of his other curios, for she had scorned them all. His old brown velvet coat was weather-stained and sun-bleached; his white shirt was made of the coarsest cotton. Yet something, she did not know what, told her that he was a gentleman and an extraordinarily sensitive one to boot. She was in a land where poverty is dignity; in Sicily good manners and elegance of expression need no teaching.

"La Primavera" was sitting near the table on one of Zita's cheap chairs, recent acquisitions, with brightly dyed fibre-string seats, examining the lower portion of her jewel-casket.

Salvatore had returned to his mending. There was for him an exquisite silence in the room. The girl's presence filled it with enchantment. When she had examined the casket, she drew her chair closer to the table and began her inspection of all his small objects; one by one she lifted them up, asking questions from time to time, which showed both intelligence and ignorance. She was enjoying herself immensely; she liked fingering the antiques, with the soil of Girgenti still clinging to them.

They were seated at the same table, like fellow-workers or old companions, when a loud knock came to the door.

"That will be my aunt," the girl said. Her voice expressed anxiety; she looked at her little wrist-watch. "How the time has flown!" She rose quickly from her seat as her aunt bustled into the cottage.

She was a big, heavy-busted woman, with elaborately dressed and expensively tinted hair and large black eyes. A rich woman, obviously, and one whose beauty had not withstood her natural laziness and greed.

Mrs. Bullock disliked Sicily because she never got what she considered a good meal in any of the country places. That poor food was sometimes well cooked she admitted, for Sicilians have been famed for their cooking ever since the days of Virgil; but that she ever got both good food and good cookery she denied. She was Christine Lovat's aunt by marriage.

Mrs. Bullock's loud voice grated on Salvatore's ears; instinctively he disliked her.

"I thought you were never coming, Christine. What have you been doing?" Mrs. Bullock's presence so filled the room that it used up both its air and space. Her expensive clothes and atmosphere of prosperity vulgarized her.

"I am having my first lesson in Greek art. I hoped to buy a terracotta Venus."

"Now, Christine, don't go buying any more of these rubbishy things; our luggage is heavy enough already. You'll never look at them when you get home."

"But I haven't bought anything." The girl's eyes dropped; the jewel-case had been given to her. It was as light as air; she would pack it herself amongst her softest blouses.

"You can ask the young man to tell me where I can buy some good lace. I read in that huge book in the hotel that you can get bargains in lace here. Ask him, Christine."

Salvatore being appealed to, threw back his head. "No, Signorina, I do not know." His answer was final.

"Then come along, Christine, and leave all these things alone."

When Christine said "good-bye" to Salvatore, her eyes said, "I will call for the jewel-case; please forgive her shocking manners."

Salvatore did not answer the aunt's "addio." Her coming had spoilt his day; it had turned spring into winter.

When Christine and Mrs. Bullock were outside the cottage a wave of heat, like the air from an oven, blew against their faces. The sirocco is accountable for a very great deal. In Sicily it has eaten and is still eating into the golden stones of the Greek temples, just as it is eating into the temperament and the health of her people. Mrs. Bullock's temper was affected by it. It blew up white dust and dirty pieces of paper into her face; it obliterated every trace of beauty to which the sulphur city can lay claim. With her sunshade held well in front of her to screen her eyes from the dust, she almost fell into the middle of a flock of black and white goats. Just in time Christine came to her rescue.

"You might have warned me, Christine," was all she said by way of thanks. "How was I to see the wretched animals?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't notice that you couldn't see."

"Walking along with your head in the clouds as usual! For heaven's sake let's get out of this beastly town as soon as ever we can! I wouldn't have spent all those francs in driving up to the city if I had known that I couldn't get any lace. I do think Sicily is abominably over-rated." Mrs. Bullock had made the remark a hundred times before.

"Shall we try at the barber's shop?" Christine's sense of humour helped her. It sounded absurd to go to the barber's shop for lace, but she was in Sicily.

"No, no, it's not worth while. If that young man with the superior air and mighty fine teeth didn't know where we could buy any, I suppose there isn't any to be bought. He would have got his 'squeeze' from the barber."

Christine laughed; she really could not help it. The very idea of her devout young scholar, her grave Dante, taking a "squeeze" from the barber! It was too absurd!

"You don't imagine that youth was above a squeeze, do you? Why, the whole of Sicily lives on squeezes. A cabman tells you of a good hotel; he gets his squeeze from the landlord: the landlord tells you of a good photographer; he gets his squeeze from the photographer: if you ask your way to a cake-shop, the man who tells you which one to go to, will get his squeeze in cakes."

"Has it ever struck you, Aunt, how much squeezing there would be in England if our workmen, or we ourselves, were paid one and twopence for twelve hours' work? Some of the people in Sicily work nineteen hours for even less. I think Sicily is wonderful; its very beggars are gentlemen and every young mother a grave Madonna."

"That's one way of looking at things. You shut your eyes to the dust and dirt and fleas and to the idle wretches who ought to be working."

"Ought to be working? That's just it! But if there isn't any work to do, is it a crime to sleep in the sun?"

"Call me one of those silly jolting cabs, Christine. You always see things from an exaggerated point of view. Lancashire people would find something to do."

The girl beckoned to a cabman who had been following them down the street. When her aunt had seated herself carefully in his carriage she said, "Tell him not to go at a breakneck pace; I don't intend to endure what I did last night."

Christine did her best to explain to the man that the lady was nervous, that they wished to go slowly.

The man said, "Si, si, Signorina, I understand," and off they started at a walk, which soon degenerated into a crawl. Christine was in despair.

"The man's a fool," Mrs. Bullock said. "Just because I didn't want to have my neck broken going down that steep hill, we are to crawl through these streets!"

Christine called out, "Piu avanti."

When the man cracked his whip the horse kicked up its hind legs and put its head down on the ground. Mrs. Bullock clutched at Christine and screamed. Hearing her cry the man gave the animal such a beating with the butt end of his whip that it started off at a clattering pace through the ill-paved streets. Children lying in the dust were sent helter-skelter; men with portable shops had to hurl them on to the sidewalk to get them out of danger; the goats which had so nearly upset Mrs. Bullock a few minutes before dropped their milk from their heavy udders as they scattered themselves about the street; water-sellers cursed at the cabman and consigned his unborn offspring to eternal damnation.

Through the street they went at an absurd rate, which the horse kept up until it reached the rough road. There its little spurt of temper was quickly exhausted; it was not capable of sustained effort. The driver looked round and smiled triumphantly. His wild steed was conquered; the lady need have no more fear.

Christine could think of nothing to say which would win back her aunt's good humour. It was an ugly day, relaxing and uninspiring, just the sort of day that Christine would have enjoyed spending in the Casa Salvatore, learning from its padrone practical lessons in classic Sicily.

CHAPTER V

When they reached the Hotel des Temples, Mrs. Bullock's face brightened; here at least was comfort and modern civilisation. Here she knew that she could find people to talk to, and people with whom she could play bridge on a day which was intolerable for driving.

"I spoke to a very nice foreigner who is staying in the hotel this morning, Christine. He is going to make a hand at bridge with us to-night. He is really quite nice. There he is!"

Their cab had pulled up with a jerk at the entrance to the hotel. "Il Signore," as Zita called him, was standing on the doorstep. He hurried forward and helped Mrs. Bullock to alight. He had seen her niece at table d'hote the night before. He had also seen her start off alone to the city directly she had finished her breakfast. Only an English girl would have chosen to walk such a distance on such a day.

Mrs. Bullock smiled graciously to the good-looking man who was ready to pay her pretty attentions.

"This is my niece, Christine Lovat," she said. Christine had sprung from the cab unaided.

"Lovat?" he said. "That is a Scots name, is it not?" His attention was still given to Mrs. Bullock.

"Yes, Lovat is a Scots name, but how very clever of you to know it! It is not obviously Scots like Mackinnon or Macdonald. Have you ever lived in Scotland?"

"No, that is a pleasure to come," he said, "but I have read your ballads, I know your history."

"I am English," Mrs. Bullock said. "I am from prosaic Lancashire—Manchester." She was almost sorry to have to admit the fact.

"A musical people. You are fond of music? I am sure you are."

"Yes, I love it." Mrs. Bullock spoke the truth. Music was her humanising passion. But she did not appreciate the old music of Sicily; it was too Arcadian, too elusive. "Do you play the piano?" she asked eagerly. "I am longing to hear some good music again."

"If you will allow me, I will play to you this evening. I do not pretend to be a musician, but I can play a little."

So far Christine had not spoken. There was something about the personality of the man which attracted her and interested her even while it repelled her. He was good-looking in an interesting and magnetic manner; his mentality was keenly alive. But it seemed to her that he was pandering to her aunt's vanity, for what reason she could not imagine. She was not the sort of woman to really attract a man of his type.

After a few minutes' further conversation, Mrs. Bullock said, "We must get some of this awful dust brushed off before lunch, Christine, so for the present addio, Signor Zarano."

Signor Zarano, or Count Andrea Zarano, as he was officially styled (he preferred to drop his title in everyday life; it had its uses when social influence was necessary, but in his work as an archæologist it was a drawback) stood looking at both Christine and her aunt until they had disappeared up the stair. The elder woman was what Italian men, who admire fat women, would call "superba." Signor Zarano did not admire large women. The girl was enchanting. In Sicily she was as cool and refreshing to the eye on a sirocco day as a meadow full of lady-smocks.

He went into the public sitting-room and sat himself down at the piano. He was playing when Christine and her aunt came downstairs.

Christine stopped. "Listen, Auntie! That is how he plays—that is being able to 'play a little.'"

"I knew he would play well if he played at all, my dear. He is the sort of man who never would do a thing at all, if he did not do it well."

Christine knew that she had been correct in her judgment; her aunt's vanity had been touched by "the foreigner's" charming manners and his tactful attentions. Mrs. Bullock was susceptible to flattery. Before going down to lunch she had taken more than usual care to powder her nose effectively, and she had also put on one of her freshest and most expensive crepe-de-chine blouses.

Christine had not changed, but she had taken off her big panama hat and brushed the dust out of her luxuriant hair. For her age she looked very young and extremely natural.

During lunch her quick eyes took in every detail of the scene outside and of the new visitors at the different tables. She found amusement in watching their varying expressions. Some of them seemed wholly intent upon the coming food; was there going to be anything to eat which they considered good food, or was it going to be risotto, dyed yellow with saffron? Sicily was forgotten; lunch for the time being usurped their intelligence. There were others, in the minority certainly, who looked as if it were a terrible nuisance to have to waste time on eating food at all. Anything would do for them while Sicily was calling and their days were limited. These ardent souls ate their omelettes whilst they read their guide-books, with the white dust of the high road still on their boots and clothes.

With a smile lighting up her very blue eyes they met the intent gaze of Count Andrea Zarano. She blushed until her very neck was rosy. It was absurd to behave like a school-girl, for he had only looked at her, and since her arrival in Italy she had very often been looked at, even as the Count was looking at her now. She was not in the least vain, but she was perfectly well aware that she was pretty and that in Sicily her fairness attracted general attention. But there was something about this clever foreigner's eyes which disconcerted her. They seemed to establish an intimacy with her. She disliked the feeling and tried to shake it off.

When they had finished their lunch, she followed her aunt out into the garden, where they always drank their coffee. They had just seated themselves when Count Zarano appeared on the scene.

"Tell Orestes to bring three cups, Christine." The diminutive Sicilian waiter who was carrying the coffee was called Orestes. "Count Zarano, you will drink a cup of coffee with us, won't you?"

"Thank you, Madam, this is kind of you. I will allow myself a quarter of an hour of your pleasant society before I return to my work. No, no brandy, thank you."

"Work? Are you not a tourist, like ourselves?"

"Certainly not, Madam. I am engaged here on Government archæological work. At the present moment I am supervising the excavations at the Temple of Aesculapius." He shot a covert glance at Christine, who so far had ignored his acceptance of her aunt's invitation. She considered that it was rather impertinent of the man to follow them as he had done from the luncheon room.

Did he work with Salvatore Mazzini, she wondered? Still, she was not to be drawn. Some feminine instinct in the girl told her that while he was addressing her aunt and flattering her with trivial, un-English attentions, he was doing it all with one end in view; he was thinking only of herself. She could feel his thoughts physically and she knew that he meant her to feel them.

When the coffee arrived, she carried off her own cup to a distant part of the garden, where a seat in the wall afforded a splendid view of the temples. Count Andrea Zarano had to remain with her aunt, who was delighted to find herself in his amusing company. Recognizing the fact that it would be bad policy and worse manners to follow the girl, he proceeded to put the time to its best use. To win the vain aunt's good opinion meant future opportunities of speaking to the niece. The girl's attitude rather pleased him; her youthful attempt to snub him amused him; it made the hunt more worth while.

Christine did not return to her aunt until the Count's quarter-of-an-hour had elapsed. When she seated herself beside her, Mrs. Bullock said:

"Don't you like Count Zarano? I hope he didn't think it rude of you."

"I don't know enough about him to like or dislike him. I thought he wanted to talk to you and three is always a stupid number."

Mrs. Bullock gathered together the grounds of the brown sugar which lay at the bottom of her cup. Candied sugar for her black coffee was one of the many things which she always took with her to foreign hotels. At this particular moment, she felt inclined for something very sweet, something crunchie, something which would help to sustain the pleasant feeling which her clever companion had given her.

Christine watched her eat the sugar. She knew every characteristic of her temperament. She knew that she had been simulating a feeling of intelligent interest in Signor Zarano's archæological work, which she would scarcely have dared to express before her niece. To Christine she never even pretended to be anything but bored with all the ancient things in Italy and Sicily. She had come to Sicily for the winter for its sunshine and because it had become rather fashionable to go to Sicily. She enjoyed doing the fashionable thing.

"I wonder what his nationality is?" she said. "I'm sure he's not Italian."

"Austrian, I should say," said Christine. "He is written down as Count Zarano on the room-board in the hall."

"I always liked Austrians," Mrs. Bullock said. "They are such gentlemen."

"So are Italians," Christine said hotly. "In Sicily the very beggars look aristocrats; Italy is the home of simple dignity."

"So you say. I haven't met any of the upper classes and the rest of the people seem to me to be waiters and mandoline-players."

"Oh, Auntie!" Christine said. Her eyes expressed what she knew to be the truth—that her aunt had not coined the phrase herself, that Count Zarano had probably used just those words.

"He does not look Sicilian, does he?"

"No, not a bit. I don't think he is one of Italy's true sons."

Mrs. Bullock stretched herself. "Well, I am going to have a siesta. What will you do with yourself until tea-time? We might take a drive if the air gets cooler after sundown."

"Oh, don't bother about me—I have a thousand things I want to do—to 'read up' Girgenti, for one thing, and darn horrible stockings for another. Even in Sicily stockings won't give you any peace." She kicked off her white antelope slipper. "Just look at that toe." Her big toe was sticking through her white silk stocking. "I do think it might behave itself in Sicily; it's always so pushing."

"Alice is busy with my things all day long, washing my fine bodices and brushing my dresses. The dust is awful. I really couldn't let my undies go out with the hotel washing; the things are beaten on the stones just as if they were empty potato sacks."

Christine knew that these remarks were made to show her that she need not expect Alice to do any of her mending for her.

"But I'd rather come to Sicily with no maid than stay in England and have one. 'There is a land of pure Delight, where Gods immortal dwell.'" She sang her favourite lines gaily. She was longing for her aunt to go off to her rooms and leave her to enjoy herself in her own way.

"I'm sure it isn't pure delight on a sirocco day—and this is only the first day of it; Signor Zarano tells me that the sirocco always lasts for three days."

"The hotel is comfy and even on sirocco days the garden is a delight. And there are sure to be lots of bridge hands amongst all these new visitors. Bridge was surely invented for days abroad when the sirocco was blowing."

They parted at the foot of the stairs, Mrs. Bullock to sleep in her bedroom until tea-time, Christine to dash off breathless letters to her girl-friends in England.

CHAPTER VI

One evening, while Mrs. Bullock and Count Zarano and two other visitors who were staying in the Hotel des Temples were enjoying a game of bridge, and Christine Lovat was puzzling her young brains over Sicily's long history, Salvatore Mazzini was following a black donkey which carried his Greek urns up the hill to the town. What he had to do had been done so easily that it seemed absurd that the anticipation of it had kept him awake for many nights.

Zita was waiting for him, a miserable little Zita, weighed down by shame and fear. From to-night onwards, their home was to be dishonoured, their hearth sacrileged. The picture of the Madonna would look down upon the very spot on the floor which held Salvatore's stolen treasures.

Zita's adventure with the Signore was still her own secret. She had not dared to tell Salvatore, even if by doing so it would have proved that she was right, that the Signore was not the sort of man in whom he could put implicit trust. Zita knew that her brother would certainly vindicate her honour; his own honour would not let him rest until his vendetta was accomplished. This being the case, she determined to keep the awful experience to herself. It had been a bitter punishment for her folly.

As Salvatore followed his ass up the long hill his thoughts were in a hopelessly chaotic state. He was forcing himself into doing this deed which he despised himself for doing and which he knew was going to make both his own and Zita's days unbearable. Why was he doing it? He could not say why, only that the will of the Signore was stronger than his own and that he had promised to do it. He wanted money for his career very, very badly, but since he had met the English girl, he knew that his career could never really matter if he sold his honour. La Primavera respected him and imagined that his sense of honour was greater than her own! If she knew what he was doing to-night, bringing into the town, under cover of the darkness, his stolen goods, what would she call him?

He knew that she would dismiss him from her mind as a thief and a low fellow, totally beneath her both socially and morally, and that she would never gladden his house again. And she was coming! Yes, she was coming to claim her jewel-case. Then his thoughts veered round.

He saw himself taking his place as a distinguished student in Rome at the School of Archæology. He would be able to carry out his dream, which would one day make him wealthy. He would be able to lead an honourable and useful life. How could it matter if to win all this he kept the two urns which he had found by mere chance? He had not even been digging at the time when he discovered them; they were finds quite outside his government work.

The black donkey toiled on and Salvatore followed it—a very ordinary sight in Girgenti, a man bringing water to his home after his day's work.

When at last he arrived at the Casa Salvatore, he called out in a ringing voice, "Acqua, acqua!"

The cottage door was opened and Zita apeared, large-eyed and solemn. If a murdered corpse had been coming into her house she could not have felt more guilty, more afraid.

"Senta!" Salvatore said, as he carefully lifted one of the urns from the pig-skin. It was empty and very light, yet he lifted it as if it were full of water. A neighbour might have noticed his late return from the well.

As Zita took the vase in her arms a chill ran through her. How she hated it! Her very knees shook whilst she held it. At Salvatore's injunction she carried the dreaded object to her bed and deposited it safely on the cloth which she had spread over the grand quilt. Salvatore handed her the second urn in silence. In the same manner it was deposited on her bed.

Then without a word, Salvatore shut the door of the cottage and called out,

"Avanti."

The patient ass at once started off at a quick trot; relieved of its burden, it knew it was going home.

When the door was shut Zita stood motionless. The feeble light from the lamp which burnt beneath the picture of the Virgin threw fitful shadows across the room. It was too dark for her to see the figures and delicate tracery on the objects which lay like two big black birds of ill-omen on her bed. They were large urns with high handles, of a delicate shape and workmanship.

She remained looking at them, with folded hands. Their grace of form was obvious to the most ignorant eye and her hands had felt the perfection of their glaze. The longer she looked at them the more horrified she became. They were finer than any vases in the Museum.

. . . .

When Salvatore opened the door, he found his sister standing motionless beside the urns. He put his arms round her waist and drew her close to him. Together they looked silently at the dark objects. Then impulsively Zita flung her arms round his neck.

"Two corpses, Salvatore mio, the corpses of our honour! I saw the Angel of Truth fly out of the door as you brought these things in."

"Silenzio!" Salvatore cried, as he tried to disengage himself from her clinging arms. "They are magnificent.

Don't you want to examine them? Have you lost your sense of beauty?"

"No, no! I have seen them. I have seen more than I want to see! They are finer than anything in the Museum. It is their beauty which I don't want to see, it is their beauty which is killing me!"

In silence Salvatore freed himself from her arms. He must light the lamp, but before doing so he must take precautions, the same precautions as he had taken the night before—the precautions of a thief.

Zita stood spellbound while he went to the street door and stuffed a piece of cotton-wool into the key-hole. Already he was accustomed to cunning and secrecy!

When the key-hole was plugged up, he did the same thing to the window, for where the wooden shutters met, there was a space large enough for curious eyes to see through. For as high as a man's head could reach from the level of the street down to the sill Salvatore filled up the aperture with cotton wool. When he had finished he lit the lamp.

Zita buried her head in her arms. Salvatore spoke sharply.

"Senta! I shall want your help."

She raised tragic eyes to his and watched him uncover the hole in the floor. She was there to give him the assistance which he required. When the bed for the urns was ready, he took her hand.

"Come and look at them," he said gently. "On one there is a Dionysian procession; on the other, the Birth of Athene. You may never see them again."

"Please don't ask me to look at them, Salvatore." Her voice was not pleading.

Salvatore turned from her impatiently and went into her room. When he returned, with one of the vases in his arms, she took it in hers, while he placed himself in readiness to receive it in the hole.

If he had known Keats's immortal lines:—

> "What men or Gods are these? What maidens loath?
> What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
> What pipes, what timbrels? What wild ecstacy?"

surely he would have repeated them as he took his precious burden from Zita's arms and laid it carefully in its bed of soil?

Salvatore buried the "thing of beauty" carefully and in silence, except for the noise of falling earth as it poured from a sack into the hole.

The second urn was buried in the same manner. Its beauty, which should have been a joy for ever, was again lost to the world. And it must remain lost until some wealthy American gave it to his country, which knew not Greece. But even there:

> "The piping figures would still play on."

. . . .

Salvatore's work was done. La Gioconda had gone tearfully to bed. Half-an-hour later the cottage looked as if nothing had occurred to disturb its small routine. The cotton-wool had been removed from the window and from the key-hole.

CHAPTER VII

An incident happened a few days later which influenced the whole current of Christine Lovat's life. She was seated near the Temple of Juno, within the Temenos, or that portion of land which in classical days was cut off from the public lands for the maintenance of the rulers of the temples and for the sports of the gods, with her back resting against one of the golden-hued columns.

The sirocco had exhausted itself, and Sicily was once more the Laughing Land. Her eyes were tired with the flood of light and the riot of colour which everywhere surrounded her. Near by some goats were satisfying themselves off a vegetation which all other milk-producing animals would have scorned. Suddenly the bleating of a kid caught her ears; it was the cry of an animal in pain. She rose from her seat, for the distressed bleating told her that the kid was very young. After waiting for a moment or two she saw it dragging itself along on three shaky legs; it must in falling from some great height have had its leg crushed by a loose stone. Poor little thing! Her heart ached for it. Obviously the leg had been broken. While she was wondering what she could do, she saw a brown Homburg hat appear above the rocky precipice on the outer side of the temple.

After the hat came the shoulders and at last the person of Count Zarano. From his hidden position on a ladder he had heard, as Christine had done, the bleating of a suffering kid; but he had not seen Christine. He picked the kid up in his arms and seated himself on one of the fallen drums of a column and examined the leg carefully. The bleating grew less pitiful.

Christine's eyes were watching the deft fingers of the surgeon. With the kid between his knees he took a handkerchief out of his pocket and tore it into strips; then, with fingers whose nicety of touch recalled Salvatore's, he proceeded to bind up the broken limb. Two pieces of dry olive-wood which lay close at hand made admirable splints.

When the operation was completed, the surgeon took the patient in his arms and carried it off to a farm-house. He had been quite unconscious of the fact that anyone, least of all Christine, had seen his deed of mercy.

The girl's senses had been thrilled by the incident. Her eyes had never left the Count's hands while he was performing the delicate operation; they still followed him as he walked over the rough ground with his burden held securely in his arms.

"Well," she said to herself, "that shows how little I can read character. That proves I was quite wrong." She felt so ashamed of her lack of judgment and of her instinctive distrust of the man, that she longed to apologise; an almost childish desire came to her to make some atonement for her conduct.

That the deed bore fruit is one of the curious workings of Providence. Why had she been permited to see that act of mercy? It was a question which she was often to ask herself in future years.

It was on the evening of the next day that Christine, to atone for her false judgment of her aunt's chosen cavalier, allowed him to take her to see the temples by moonlight. Mrs. Bullock had refused to go with her; she preferred to stay in the hotel and listen to Count Zarano's music rather than risk a debacle to her expensively-turned-out person. Christine did not understand that what is "a sweet disorder" at nineteen, at forty-five becomes a damnable give-away.

"We can go into the garden when the moon rises, Christine, and look at the temples from the terrace. They will be quite as beautiful from the distance in the bright moonlight."

Christine sighed. "I should love to see the shadows of the Temple of Concordia when it is lit up by a full moon; they must look so mysterious. Please let me go alone! Or may I ask Orestes if he can come? He'd like a franc or two."

"You can't do that, Christine. Certainly not! Fancy going with a waiter to the temples!"

"Can I come to the rescue, Madam?"

It was the Count who spoke. He had an uncanny habit of appearing unexpectedly at their side.

"Will you allow me to take your niece to the temples? It really is a sight she ought not to miss. Even without a moon I prefer the temples at night."

Mrs. Bullock could not refuse his timely offer. Inwardly, she cursed herself for her laziness. To be conducted by the Count, who was always amusing, over the ruins by moonlight, and perhaps to hear him sing there, was a very different thing from going alone with Christine. She could have dressed herself suitably for the occasion.

"I shall be very glad if you will take her," she said with a cleverly simulated grace. "These last three days of sirocco have reduced me to a rag—I really couldn't summon up enough energy to scramble over those ruins again."

Christine looked delighted. "How nice of you not to mind if we leave you alone!" She turned to the Count. "I won't be five minutes in getting ready, if you can wait for me." Her eyes thanked him.

"In the meantime I will play something to your aunt," he said, as he seated himself at the piano. "What shall it be?" His eyes spoke volumes; Mrs. Bullock was rewarded.

Until Christine made her appearance he played to her aunt and talked to her with his eyes. Indeed, he left her so reluctantly that Christine came to the conclusion that in that respect also she had been mistaken. He really did enjoy her aunt's society and admired her.

While they walked to the temples, Christine did her very best to be charming and sympathetic, while her companion told her, as he had told Zita only a few days before, interesting stories about ancient Girgenti and her temples and their builders. Zita he knew had practical knowledge of a great deal about the temples, which Christine had not; but he also knew that Zita did not know lots of things which needed no explanation for Christine. When they reached the temples their conversation ceased. A scene so sublime compels silence.

The moon, which had been rising higher and higher, had now reached a point in the heavens from which it shone right down on the Temple of Concordia. It lit up the surrounding country with a pale quiet light. Never before to Christine had it looked so beautiful. Under the amazing light of a Sicilian sun, it was glorious. But to-night, bathed as it was in the serene white radiance of the moon, it was sacred. They were standing on holy ground.

"It would not tax the imagination very greatly, would it, Miss Lovat," her companion said, "to visualise some pagan pageant slowly wending its way to the temple? A festival in honour of the moon! Can you see the priest at the high altar waiting to receive the votive offerings? Can you see the bearers of them walking under the majesty of these columns?"

"What were their services like?" Christine asked. "One reads so much about their gods and the everyday life of the Greeks, but so little is ever said about their beliefs. At any rate, I can't find anything."

"We don't know what they actually believed in."

"Really?" She looked surprised.

"We know how the Egyptians worshipped, and what they believed in; but not the Greeks. All the same, it must have been a pretty sound religion to have produced these temples—they did honour their gods—that's one thing we do know."

"Oh, I am enjoying myself!" Christine said impulsively. "I am ever so glad I came. The nights in Sicily are wonderful. And it is so nice to have someone who can tell me these things. The guardians of the temples are useless."

"It is well to see the temples by night, for very great things have happened to Girgenti by night, though it was probably not on the moonlight nights. Don't you remember how the people fled from the Carthaginians by night, just as they fled with the Carthaginians from the Romans by night? And again a thousand years later they fled from the Saracens by night?"

Christine shook her head. "Take it for granted that I know nothing—I am horribly ignorant. Sicily makes me wonder what I ever did learn at school—of history, anyhow. I want to read Sicily all day long. But how can I, and see it as well? There is so much to read; it is such a long, long story."

"I can weed out the facts for you and, if you will allow me, tell you about them on the actual spot where they happened. That always helps one to remember. Knowing her history will explain her people and their characteristics; and the types of the people need explaining. The Island's various invaders and the traces of their civilisation explain a great deal. You must remember that Girgenti was under the Saracen yoke for nearly three hundred years; the Saracens were only driven out of the Island by Roger, the great Count. I say only, for 1086 is late in Sicily's story. He was the father of Roger the King, whose glorious Arabo-Norman buildings you probably saw in Palermo. The people here are still very Saracen; towns like Girgenti remained so isolated that the types are pure."

"But they aren't all Saracen in type," Christine said. "I paid a visit to a curio-dealer in the town; he digs for the Government."

The Count smiled. "I employ Salvatore Mazzini."

"Oh! You know him, do you? Well, isn't he interesting and classic in feature?"

"Yes, there is the purest Greek blood in the Mazzinis; he has a sister who has come out even closer to the ancient Greek type."

"I am going to his cottage to-morrow to get a jewel-case which he is mending for me. I believe he could really mend a broken butterfly; his hands are beautiful." She laughed. "I wanted a figure of a dancing girl or a Venus; he said he never found any, that he had none for sale."

"If he did find one, he would not be allowed to keep it."

"That is what he said. How honest he must be! No-one would be any the wiser if he kept little tiny objects, would they?"

"It pays him to be honest; most individuals, like most countries, are honest because it pays them to be. Sicily has not yet discovered that honesty in commerce means prosperity."

"Do you like the Sicilians?"

"Inasmuch that I cannot help liking all beautiful people. Commercial Sicily is an anathema."

"I thought that youth who sells antiques was more than usually refined and cultivated. He interested me; he seemed an artist by nature and his work is so fascinating; I could have spent hours watching him."

"He would be very flattered if he heard you say so."

"I'm sure he is not so silly as to be flattered by my ignorant interest in his work."

The Count restrained himself from saying what he really thought and felt; he merely said, "Salvatore Mazzini works under me. I see all he finds—he is quite an intelligent youth."

Christine was almost certain that she could detect a slight tone of dislike in her companion's voice; a suggestion that she, like so many tourists, was open to the flattery and good looks of Sicily's humbler classes; so she let the subject drop and interested herself in her surroundings. They had arrived at the fallen Telamon, which lies amidst the ruins of the Temple of Jupiter Olympus. Count Zarano seated himself on the giant's chest; he offered his hand to Christine to help her to mount.

"I think we deserve a long rest and a cigarette," he said. "Do you realise how far you have walked, Miss Lovat?"

"No, I have no idea. On such a night I could walk on for ever; I'm not a bit tired."

He helped her to seat herself comfortably on the breast of the Telamon. After a moment's silence he offered her a cigarette.

"No, thanks," she said, "Auntie objects."

. . . .

Night sounds and night scents came fitfully to them. Christine knew that speech would be less intimate than the silence which surrounded them; it was a new sensation to her, this sense-stirring power of a Sicilian night. She tried to speak lightly as she began her camouflage of words.

"Was this great monster we are sitting on some local hero?" She tapped her heels against the stone. "What a size he is! About twenty feet?"

"His original duty was to support the entablature of the temple. A Telamon is a male caryatid. You have seen the famous Greek Caryatides of Athens, haven't you?—in the British Museum."

"Yes, I suppose I have—I used to be taken to the Museum by my governess."

"Well, this fallen giant once supported what is called the entablature of the temple—that is to say, the front high part of the façade, the piece which projects over the portico."

Christine smilingly thanked him. It was nice of him to tell her these things in a simple way and not as if he thought her horribly ignorant for not knowing them.

He told her many things, for he also knew that wisdom lay in talking. The girl was adorable, but he must wait. He had played the same game before; patience was always rewarded. To the girl at his side his manner was so impersonal that there was no need for her to be distant; neither by one word nor by the slightest act had he done anything to betray the trust her aunt had put in him.

To keep his tongue from mischief—for the girl was lovely in the moonlight—he told her pretty anecdotes about the poor of Girgenti and picturesque stories from Sicilian literature. He reminded her that it was the English poet Gabriel Rossetti who had translated into English the love-songs of Enzio, Frederick of Hohenstaufen's beautiful son. He it was who first wove the love-songs of Sicily in Italian.

Whilst the girl listened she marvelled at the man's versatility; his knowledge of her own country went much deeper than her own. The man, on his part, wondered why her former reserve and obvious distrust of himself had suddenly broken down. He could not account for it. She was no coy coquette playing a different game behind her aunt's back; there must be some other reason for it. Wisely, he kept his own counsel and still more wisely, as the girl's defences broke down and she youthfully gave herself over to the pleasure and romance of the hour and the surroundings, he drew back a little. He made a determined effort not to become personal, to be while they were alone together less intimate with her than if she had been accompanied by her aunt. He gauged rightly that Christine was the type who liked to be a sympathetic and charming companion, but as yet would fear, because she did not understand, any token of passion in the male whom she was unconsciously attracting.

After resting on the fallen giant as long as anything like wisdom would permit, they wandered on towards the Temple of Aesculapius, because Christine had asked him to show her the site of his present work. It was getting late, so they had to walk quickly, as quickly as it was possible over such difficult ground. Near the farm a small flock of sheep were evidently gathered together for the night. The Count's quick ear caught the sound of a dog's angry bark; he clutched Christine's arm and hurriedly turned her round.

"What is the matter?" she said. His grasp left her in no doubt; he was alarmed.

"Hush!" he said. "Hush! The dogs have scented us; they may come. If they do, don't be alarmed—I have my revolver."

"But I'm not afraid of dogs." Christine laughed softly.

"Hush!" he said again, as his hand tightened on her arm and he hurried her on. Unfortunately they both stumbled over something, and when they recovered their footing they found themselves almost on the top of some sleeping sheep, which were also guarded by a dog, a wolf dog of Etna. With a low growl and menacing teeth it left the sheep and sprang towards the intruders. The Count put his hand in his pocket and nipped out his revolver. Christine, who had never felt the slightest fear of any sort of dog, hoped that he would not shoot it. The dog was only doing its duty, and probably the old saying held good—dogs that bark don't bite.

As he held the revolver in his hand, the dog crept closer to him, growling and showing its teeth. There was no doubt about it; it meant to spring at either one or other of them whenever it was near enough and got the chance.

Christine was at last terrified. The animal looked like a hungry wolf. A shot rang through the air. She shut her eyes. Was the dog dead? Was there no longer any danger to be feared from its awful eyes and threatening teeth? The Count loosened his hold on her arm. He had fired high to frighten the animal, which was skulking away with its tail between its legs, back to the flock which had been left under its protection.

"We must lose no time," he said urgently. "Walk as fast as you can."

Surely there was now every opportunity for holding on to the girl's arm to help her over the rugged way? But the Count did not grasp his opportunity. He made Christine walk ahead of him, while he kept a vigilant look-out. The dog might be following them, behind the huge stones and rocks which covered their path; it might attack them at any moment.

Not a word was spoken until they reached an exit of the grounds which surround the temples. When they were far from any feeding-grounds and all danger had passed, the Count said to her:

"I must indeed beg your forgiveness, Miss Lovat, though I cannot forgive myself for the fright I have given you and the danger to which I have exposed you. And how splendidly you behaved!"

"If it had not been for your revolver, where should we have been, what would have happened to me? It is I who have to thank you. I am awfully grateful."

"These night dogs are just wolves," he said. "They are terrible. But fortunately a revolver shot scares them; one need not kill them."

"I could not help smiling when you said 'don't be alarmed.' The dogs one sees in the daytime are such poor, miserable things."

"When you saw that brute, you understood?"

"Rather! Wasn't it awful? I felt certain it would spring at you." She shivered and instinctively drew closer to him.

"They are trained to guard the flocks and farm-buildings by night. I ought to have remembered; I was to blame. But as a matter of fact, I did not know that there were any sheep on this land. Not many small farmers in the district can afford to keep so precarious a stock as sheep. Still, I ought not to have allowed you to run such a risk. You were splendid, ever so plucky."

"Oh, but I wanted to go—I should probably have gone by myself."

"Never go so far from the city alone," he said quickly, "promise you won't! It really is not wise."

"Because of brigands, do you mean?"

"Not exactly brigands, the honest brigands"—he laughed at the expression—"the self-respecting brigands, I mean. The genuine article never attacks ladies or strangers; it is the landowners and mine-owners of Italy and the wage-payers for whom they lie in wait. But the country at the present moment is frightfully poor, and there are such things as footpads—even in your garden of England."

"I once got a horrible fright in New Romney. Kent is hateful in the hop-picking season."

"Well, here poverty is so great that your poorest paid labourer in Wiltshire is a lord in comparison to the well-paid skilled labourer in Sicily. So it is not wise for a wealthy lady—to all poor Sicilians English ladies and American ladies are wealthy—to wander about some parts of the country unprotected."

"Tell me why they are so poor. Are there no industries in the Island, nothing but sulphur mines?"

He shook his head. "No, Miss Lovat, under this Sicilian moon I am not going to pour into your ears Sicily's tale of woe; I am not going to spoil the romance and mystery of the night. I would rather tell you of her gods and goddesses, of the wealth and splendour of Girgenti in the days when it carried on its trade with Carthage. In spite of its sordid appearance, Girgenti is still for the South wealthy and prosperous. Sulphur has taken the place of corn and wine and oil, and it is all shipped from Porto Empedocle."

"Is there anything to see at Porto Empedocle?"

"No, nothing." At the moment the Count probably did not even remember his visit to the Port only a few days before. In his present pursuit of pleasure the tricking of Zita and her flight were forgotten.

He knew that no man need hope to win Christine Lovat who did not contemplate marrying her. He had trusted to Zita's Southern temperament, as well as to her fear of his displeasure.

. . . .

When they reached the garden of the hotel the scent of friesias and orange-blossom welcomed them. Christine had no desire to go to bed; it seemed wicked to her in her present mood to waste the glory of the stars and the moon under the blankets.

As they stood together at the front door she said, "Perhaps Auntie would like to come out—the garden is so cool and sweet-scented."

Her aunt had not gone to bed, but she preferred sitting in the music-room with the window wide open. Would Count Zarano play to her for half-an-hour?

Of course he would. He was always polite and tactful, and never failed to do the correct thing in the most winning manner. To do a good deed ungraciously is wasted virtue.

"I will sit on the balcony outside the music-room," Christine said. "While I listen I can see the moon."

As he carried her lounge chair closer to the window, he said, "What shall I play to you and to the moon?"

"The Moonlight Sonata—yes, play it to the moon." Her eyes thanked him.

"The Moonlight Sonata, that is your choice. I think I can play it to-night."

While Christine listened outside the window, her aunt sat beside the Count, close to the piano.

He played the sonata as only an artist can play it, and he was playing it for Christine alone, while his mobile face smiled and responded to Mrs. Bullock's admiring attitude. His good looks increased with intimacy, and he could when the opportunity demanded the effort be as simple and easily pleased as an unspoilt boy.

And so it came to pass that the bread of kindness which he had cast upon the waters was returned to him fourfold. His act of unstudied kindness and pity for a suffering kid had changed Christine's distrust of him into admiration. Nothing which he could have done could have more completely proved to her how badly she had judged his character.

While he played to her she lay looking up at a southern sky. The scent of Sicily's night flowers was subtly wafted to her, while the occasional screech of a far off owl brought to her senses the wildness of the outer Eden. Roses, white stocks and friesias were near at hand; in the distance there were wild hills, and beyond the Greek temples the African Sea.

She clasped her hands in a silent ecstacy. The night was bewildering; the Count's music was exquisite; she was young and Sicily was persistently calling to her.

The Count was in love with Christine as he had been in love with many women in his life. While he was in love he was capable of great things. While she was still to be won, he could not imagine himself doing a selfish or ignoble deed to such a woman, a girl-woman—or rather, a boy-girl, whose clear eyes reflected the unsoiled mind of a child. If she was not as innocent as a child it was because, probably, she had been instructed in certain facts of life. Her own thoughts and instincts were as clear as the waters which bubbled over the stones and wound their gurgling way through the wooded glens and mountain passes of her own country.

. . . .

When they said good-night the Count kissed her aunt's hand. As he did so a thrill ran through Christine's senses. By some telepathic means he made her feel that the kiss was hers; she felt the softness of his lips upon her hand.

A blush dyed her face, for she was conscious of his instinctive understanding. She had accepted his caress. In the future, if she should have to reject any attempt of his to make love to her, he would always know that on this night at least his lips had pleased her.

Her confusion amused him and kindled his passion. He read her thoughts as clearly as he had read them all the evening; he knew that he had stirred new feelings in the undeveloped girl and that they were bewildering her.

And certainly they were new feelings to Christine. For the first time in her life her thoughts enfolded her in a lover's arms, a new loneliness awoke in her and distressed her. Was it really she herself, the Christine whom she thought she knew so well, that had longed to be kissed by a man with whom she was not in love, or certainly not consciously in love? Yet just as he had been tender to the suffering kid she would like him to be tender to her now. She found herself alone in a strange world.

Zita of course could have explained everything to her, for Zita was born with sex instincts. Zita knew that youth cannot trifle with Sicily's moonlight nights. In Sicily youth must walk discreetly, for the gods who are in hiding have not lost their cunning. Lovers may dance, but Pan still pipes the tune; they must tread his measure. If mortals will usurp immortal ground they must pay their toll. Nemesis is ever busy.

CHAPTER VIII

THE next day at about four o'clock in the afternoon Christine knocked at the door of the Casa Salvatore. A girl's, not a man's, voice called out, "Prego entrare."

Christine entered blithely. Zita, who was patching the pockets of her brother's sun-faded working coat, gave her visitor a smiling welcome.

Zita's beauty so surprised Christine that she forgot the very neat sentence of Italian which she had prepared. "Buon giorno," was all she managed to say; while Zita's great eyes looked at her, half in pity and half in wonder, for La Primavera had been seen very frequently in the society of Count Zarano. Zita had seen her with him herself, and she had been told the fact very often by other people, people whom it would be impossible to imagine could be interested in the stranger's affairs. The Count and "la bella Bionda," as the English Signorina was called by the local inhabitants, on account of her golden hair, were constantly together. In Sicily everything that is human is interesting to humanity; nothing is unobserved, nothing is unimportant.

Zita had so far seen Christine Lovat only from a distance. Now that the very breath of spring was standing smiling at her, she knew why Salvatore spoke of her as La Primavera. But, quick to mend her manners, she offered her visitor a chair.

Christine sat down, and when she had got over her surprise she said in perfect Italian, "I have come for the little terracotta box which your brother was mending for me. It was to be ready to-day."

"Si, si, Signorina." Zita jumped up on a chair. The repaired articles were always kept, while they were drying, in a wall-cupboard, which was too high up for Zita to reach without aid.

Christine watched the girl poised on the chair. Here was the living thing which she had wanted to buy in terracotta, the most perfect woman Christine had ever seen.

Zita looked into the cupboard. The jewel-case was there right enough, quite ready and waiting for Christine. She was just going to lift it up when a thought came to her. If she were to say that it was not there, that Salvatore must have put it somewhere else, the Signorina would have to come again and Salvatore would see her.

With her head thrown back over her shoulder, she said, "I am so sorry, Signorina, it is not here. (May the Blessed Virgin forgive my lie!) My brother must have put in somewhere safe. Can you call again at half-past six—he will be at home then—or to-morrow night? I am indeed sorry."

Christine looked at her wrist-watch; it was now nearly five o'clock. "When I've had a little talk with you I will go and eat some cakes in the cake-shop and return at six o'clock."

Zita knew no English, but she was quick and well-accustomed to the Italian of English and other forestieri, so she helped Christine to express herself, and succeeded very well. She understood almost everything she said in Italian.

"Please to stay as long as you like, Signorina. It will give me great pleasure if you will remain with me here until my brother returns from his work." Zita spoke very slowly and carefully.

"I will stay for a few minutes," Christine said, "and enjoy a rest, as I am a little tired."

"Have you walked all the way from the hotel, Signorina?"

Christine nodded. "It is not so far."

"You are strong, Signorina." Zita smiled. "And you look like a delicate flower which passes with the spring, so very quickly."

Christine laughed; she understood. The girl's words were simply chosen. "I am very strong," she said. "I enjoy walking."

"Sicilian ladies do not walk, Signorina. In Girgenti they only walk a little way along the street, to the Villa Garibaldi, just enough to get a sniff of fresh air," Zita smiled, "and to show their clothes."

"But you walk?"

"Gia, gia, I am strong—I walk far every day."

"Where do you walk to?"

"To my brother's work. He is digging near the temple of Aesculapius." In Zita's answers there were many expressions of respect which are quite untranslatable.

"Oh, I know," Christine said. "I went there by moonlight."

"Si, si, Signorina," Zita nodded.

"You know? You have heard that I was there?"

"Si, si, with the Signore; he conducted you. There was a night-dog."

Christine smiled. "I thought no-one saw us. The night-dog was horrible."

"In Sicily everything has eyes, Signorina, nothing is unseen."

"But who told you?" Christine did not care in the least, but it amused her, this local interest in other people's concerns.

"My brother Salvatore; where he heard it I do not know." Zita smiled sympathetically. "Prego, mi dispiace."

"Your brother must have seen us, I suppose. No-one else could have told him, no-one knows us—me."

"Prego, Signorina, in Girgenti everyone knows everybody and their business. If I go across the street to post a letter, no-one is looking, I can see no eyes; yet Salvatore will be told by more than one friend that I went to the post. Someone will say, 'Your sister is looking remarkably well—I saw her this afternoon at the post,' or they will say, 'Artichokes are dear just now—I saw your sister buying some to-day.' Salvatore then knows that I must have left the house. Salvatore is good, he does not trouble; but if he were my husband there might be trouble."

Christine laughed. "But may you not leave the house when he is at work?"

"I have no mother, Signorina."

"You cannot go out as I do?"

"If a neighbour cannot take me with her, I must wait for my brother. I prefer to wait, Signorina."

"But to-day you are not with him and it is so fine?"

"No, not to-day, Signorina." Zita felt guilty; she knew why she had not left the house. For many days now she had not left it. Since the urns were buried in it she had stayed at home to guard their stolen treasures; Casa Salvatore had become a cemetery. The girl had grown to dread the long hours spent in it alone. Each day when she had asked her brother if she might join him at his work he had made a different excuse.

"Your brother enjoys his work, he is an artist?"

"Si, si, Signorina." Admiration shone in Zita's eyes. "He is a true artist and a good brother."

"I think he has a good sister." Christine had her fingers on the patch which Zita was puting on the large pocket of Salvatore's coat. "You are a dear," she said, "but don't you want to go out and enjoy the evening air? Come," she said, "come with me and have some cakes and chocolate at the pasticceria. I will wait for your brother. Come along, please do—I can't go alone."

"Ma, Signorina." Zita shook her head.

"Why ma? I will take no buts." Christine laughed at the girl's astonished protests. "Please come, she said. "I want a companion, and you càn ask for the things more correctly than I can. I want some strawberry tarts; we do not get them in the hotel, and I saw them in the shops." Zita still hesitated. The idea was astounding.

"We still have three-quarters of an hour before your brother returns. Don't you like chocolate and strawberry tarts?"

"But my house!" Zita blushed. "Mi scusa, Signorina."

"No, I won't excuse you. No-one will run away with the house." Christine looked round. "Will someone steal your table and chairs?"

"No, no." Zita's heart was heavy with guilt, but the Signorina was charming, so charming that she felt as if she would like to do anything in the world to please her. Her untroubled eyes were as blue and white as the old jug which held their table wine; they smiled sympathetically at Zita; while the pink in her cheeks and the brightness of her hair reminded Zita of the angels in old church pictures.

She was ready to go with Christine, but to make herself a little more suitable to accompany the English Signorina, she took her black cashmere shawl, bordered with a silk fringe, from its box and put it round her slim shoulders. It fell almost to the ground in long straight folds.

Christine was delighted. She remembered what the Count had said about Salvatore Mazzini's sister. He had said that Salvatore was Greek, but that his sister was still more Greek, that she was a rebirth of Greek Sicily. In her shawl she was exactly like a Tanagra figurine.

The two beautiful girls stepped out into the sunlit street. Zita locked her house-door and put the big key in her underskirt pocket. Christine looked athletic and northern-bred. She was as usual dressed in pure white; a panama hat almost covered the glory of her hair, and yet it suited her. A hat would have been a desecration on a head like Zita's. They made a striking contrast to each other, but both girls were completely indifferent at the moment of their appearance.

Count Zarano, who was following them cautiously, was subtly contrasting their merits. That Zita was the more beautiful he had to admit, for she was well-nigh perfect; but to eyes long accustomed to Sicily, Christine had qualities which were newer and more exciting. There was about her the charm of a strange woman. Her possibilities were a matter of speculation, an unknown quantity. He knew Zita's nature—or thought he did—and he could tell pretty accurately what her passions would make of her eventually. She was, he felt sure, not to be judged by the conventions which controlled her conduct; she was temperamentally a daughter of the South.

Zita's eyes were like two dark lakes; Christine's were cool, clear streams whose waters stirred no mud. It would be his pleasure to see knowledge from the tree of good and evil come into those innocent eyes, to watch the effect which life lived fully and completely would have on a woman of her type. At present compared to Zita she was almost sexless.

He had loved madly many southern women; he had tasted of almost every forbidden fruit and found it sweet. But this boy-girl, whose very presence was as cooling and invigorating as Highland air, whipped his appetite for further adventures. Nothing daunted him. If to win her he had to marry her, he would do it; she was the woman he desired at the moment, and to his nature that was all that mattered. His old desire for Zita was swept aside by the ardour of his passion for Christine. Zita had tricked and fooled him; she had yet to be reckoned with. Her surrender was only a matter of time.

He hurried after them. Before they had reached the cake-shop which lies at the end of the Rupe Atenea, he had bowed to Christine as he crossed the road to join them.

"Good evening, Miss Lovat," he said when he reached her side.

Zita he scarcely noticed, so she walked on ahead. He had not seen her since the eventful afternoon at Porto Empedocle. He spoke to Christine in English, which of course Zita could not understand; but her quick wit told her that the Signore was inviting her to go somewhere with him and she was refusing. She distinctly heard her say, "No, thank you, not this evening."

A fire of intense hatred for the Signore leaped up in Zita. She had not actually hated him before; she had blamed herself for her stupidity. Now every vein in her body was burning with hatred. He was paying the deepest respect to the English girl, who was rich and a great lady, while herself he almost ignored. He might never have seen her before; he had dismissed her with the greeting he might have given to any servant who was in attendance on her mistress. Yet he had dared to say that he loved her! She knew perfectly well that his desire now was for the tall English girl, and that he did not wish them to be together. Zita could hate—it was one of her inheritances from an ancient and revengeful race. But she could love, too, and she wanted to save Christine from the man who had so shamed her, she wanted to warn her of the manner of man he was. But how could she? The Signore was now talking to Christine in the way she knew he could talk, he was carrying her thoughts with his, inspiring her with his interests, making things appear interesting which had only been ordinary before.

He wished to make a third in the cake-shop and be allowed to order the chocolate and the strawberry tarts, but Christine was dismissing him. She did it because she saw that if he made one of the party Zita would be left out. All the Italian which Christine knew would go to pieces and they would have to speak English; she could not yet join in a mixed conversation.

To Christine there was something almost tragic about the black-shawled figure and the great eyes which had become so gravely mysterious since the Count had appeared. The girl's simple outing must not be spoilt.

"Andiamo," Christine said gaily to Zita. "Addio, Count Zarano. We may meet to-night."

He had followed Christine for some distance, and was not pleased, but he was too wise to show his annoyance.

"There! I'm glad he has gone," Christine said with a relieved sigh. "I want my chocolate. I will order it if you will listen and tell me afterwards what I said wrong."

All conversations between Christine and Zita were of course rather slow, but they were getting on splendidly. It is astonishing how much can be said by signs and glances. They seated themselves at a small marble-topped table, and very soon a tall and ferociously-moustached waiter appeared. Christine gave her order.

When the waiter had gone, Zita smiled happily at Christine. "You speak Italian like a professor, Signorina, and very beautifully."

Christine was pleased. She had taken great pains to learn her Italian before she left London; she spoke it very much more correctly and more politely than the average tourist, but with great hesitation and difficulty.

"I know so little, Signorina Mazzini, and when I say something correctly I am always answered so quickly and so volubly that I cannot follow; I get lost, and depressed."

"Pregno, Signorina, that is because you speak so correctly; people think you know more than you do. You ordered the chocolate and cakes with strawberries quite correctly, just as if you could speak the language."

"Oh, but that was easy—cakes and chocolate!" she laughed.

"Ma, you said it grammatically. If you had pointed out the cakes and then said 'chocolate' to the waiter he would have understood; but your plurals were correct, Signorina."

"All Sicilians and Italians like to say pretty things; they like to make themselves agreeable."

"No, no, I do not like flattery. I never flatter, Signorina." There was meaning in her voice. "I leave that to . . ." She stopped. "Mi scusa, Signorina, but I like people to be sincere."

"To whom do you leave flattery, who is insincere?"

"Prego, mi scusa, Signorina." Zita's confusion amused Christine.

"Is it Count Zarano? Do you mean that he is insincere?" She had felt rather than seen the girl's attitude towards the Count; it reminded her of her first impression of the man.

"The Signore has no need to flatter the illustrious Signorina; what he tells her will be true."

Christine shook her head. "Who is the flatterer now?"

"I do not flatter, Signorina. My brother called you 'La Primavera'—do you know what that means?"

Christine blushed. "Yes, Spring. He called me Spring?"

"Gia, gia. He told me that you had come to our poor house like Spring when it suddenly comes after a flowerless winter. He called you 'La Primavera.' Mi scusa, Signorina, but he spoke the truth, you are La Primavera." The girl's eyes were beautifully sincere.

"It was very pretty of him, Signorina Mazzini."

"Prego, Signorina, my name is Zita."

"Then tell me, Signorina Zita, why do you dislike Count Zarano?"

"Ma, Signorina, I did not say that. He is my brother's employer."

"Your lips did not say it, Signorina Zita." Christine touched her own eyes. "It is not the lips which tell important things; I think I am learning some things about Sicily."

"The Signore is my brother's patron, Signorina; it is not well for me to say that I dislike him."

"I understand. All the same, you do dislike him, Zita. We don't only hate with our lips and we can't help our likes and dislikes."

"He is very clever, Signorina; my brother likes him."

"But you do not share your brother's feelings?"

"Prego, mi scusa, Signorina. What I think is of no importance."

Christine helped herself to another strawberry tart.

"How delicious they are!" she said. "Do you like wild strawberries, Signorina Zita? I adore them."

"I like them very much and you are very kind, Sigorina. This is a day for me to remember when life is sad."

"I am not kind at all," Christine said. "I couldn't sit here all alone." Her eyes looked round the room. "Are all these people from the country?" she asked. "They look quite different from the people of Girgenti, so much happier."

As Zita looked at the groups of people who were discussing with zest fruit-syrups and custard-cakes, Christine saw her eyes drop suddenly and a charming expression of modesty overwhelm her. A good-looking youth who was seated with a buxom woman had at last managed to catch Zita's eye. He was looking at her now as only a Sicilian can look at his "adorata." Zita's eyes became fixed on her plate.

Christine wondered what would happen? Had they met before? Would Zita ever raise her eyes? Would the youth ever leave off gazing at her?

The embarrassing situation lasted for some time. Christine felt certain that both the youth and Zita were enjoying delicious thrills.

When Christine had eaten as many strawberry tarts as she could manage and had drunk two cups of chocolate—Zita's appetite had suddenly left her—she said, "Will Signor Mazzini be back from his work yet? It is six o'clock."

Time had not existed for Zita. She rose guiltily from her chair. "Si, si, Signorina, prego mi scusa. I must hasten; I have the key." She looked anxious. "Salvatore will be alarmed if he finds the house closed."

Christine rose from her chair and went to the counter. "Please to be quick," she said. "I wish to pay for five cakes and three cups of chocolate."

Zita stood by her side, a delicious shy little figure. The youth who had been seated with his aunt had risen from his chair the moment they rose and was now standing beside them. With the grace of a courtier he bowed and said:

"I hope the Signorina arrived safely in Girgenti the other night? I have blamed myself for leaving her to go so far alone."

"Grazie, Signor, I arrived quite safely. It has been my wish to let you know, to thank you, but how could I? You were too kind." Her lashes fluttered, her blushes delighted him.

"Niente, niente," he said. "It was my good fortune to be able to assist you. I went to your church last Sunday."

She smiled. "I did not go, Signor; it was not possible."

Christine had got her change. She wished that she could have lingered longer, so as to give the young couple their chance, but she had no reason for doing so.

"Again I thank you, Signor," Zita said demurely. "My brother had not returned. I was in good time. I shall always remain grateful to you."

"Addio, Signorina." The fine bow was made again as Zita passed out of the shop.

To Christine such a meeting with any man would have counted for very little, but she did not yet know her Sicily. She did not know that it was a very daring thing for the youth to do. Sicily owes many of its customs to the unchanging East. Youths of the lower and middle classes still adhere to the old-fashioned ways of approaching the object of their adoration. A young man, if he admires a girl and wishes to marry her, approaches her in the most distant and elaborate method. The girl herself is the last person to whom he must pay his addresses.

Although Christine had only met Zita for the first time an hour before, they had drawn near to each other. Between them there was an instinctive bond of sympathy and understanding. Christine felt that Zita was lonely, that she lived a life apart from the ordinary girls of her position. It was the consciousness of sympathy that made her say, with no fear of being misunderstood:

"What good fortune that we went to that shop, Zita. Were you glad to see him?" Christine spoke meaningly. They were girls together, enjoying a small outing.

"Si, si, Signorina, I was very glad to be able to thank him. One evening he drove me home in his cart from Porto Empedocle. It was very kind of him."

"Oh, very kind—I agree with you!" Christine laughed. "He is very handsome and he looks prosperous."

"Gia, gia, and I think very honourable and sincere."

"I hope so." Christine could scarcely suppress her laughter. "What a demure child it was! Your men have such pretty names; our English names are not so romantic. What is he called?"

"I do not know his name, not at all. Prego, Signorina, do not mention to my brother Salvatore that anyone spoke to me."

Christine laughed gaily. She had hit upon an intrigue. How much had there been behind all Zita's demure shy manner, her downward glances?"

"He is a stranger. I shall never see him again," Zita said excitedly. "Salvatore would be distressed if he knew that I had permitted a stranger to drive me home. He did not know that I was at the port, it was all a mistake."

Christine promised to be discreet. "But you will see him again, Zita—you know you will. A girl always knows."

"Ah, no, no! Signorina, he is a stranger to my brother. We shall never speak to each other again." She spoke convincingly, but Christine was ignorant of the fact that the youth knew her church.

CHAPTER IX

When they arrived at the Casa Salvatore Zita unlocked the door and they went in. Before Christine had seated herself Salvatore appeared. They were just in time.

When he saw her his delight was apparent as the delight of a child, a child who suddenly finds that life is as good and wonderful a thing as the best seaside-advertisement.

After a conventional but gracious greeting, he said to his sister, "Have you given the Signorina her jewel-box? Are you satisfied with it, Signorina?"

Zita answered him in rapid and elaborate Sicilian. "I told a fib—I said I couldn't find it and asked her to return at six o'clock; she arrived an hour ago."

"Why did you pretend?" He also spoke in dialect; his eyes thanked her.

"I wanted to give you the pleasure of seeing her again."

Salvatore turned to Christine, who was laughing at Zita's flow of Sicilian, of which she had not understood one word.

"I am sorry, Signorina—it was stupid of my sister to forget. I will get it for you."

He unlocked the gay box which held all the unrepaired antiques and took out of it a smaller box, then quickly mounting on a chair, he opened the door of the wall-cupboard.

"It is in this box, but the key is in the cupboard, Signorina."

When he was too high up for Christine to see what he was doing, he opened the box, which was empty, and put it on a shelf in the cupboard. The repaired jewel-case was just where he had placed it when he told Zita that it was ready for La Primavera. He lifted it up carefully and jumped down from the chair. Christine held out her hands to receive it.

After examining it for a moment she said, "Thank you. I love it." Her eyes, as blue and true as a child's, expressed her pleasure. Salvatore's senses danced.

"Then the little box must be happy, Signorina, and I am proud."

"I shall always treasure it very highly," Christine said shyly.

"And I shall always be glad to know that something which was once mine now belongs to you, Signorina. It is an honour."

Christine wished that she knew how to speak to the brother and sister in the dignified and courteous language which seemed instinctive to both, but she could only blush and smile, which was of course all that Salvatore wanted. The right woman never does the wrong things.

"Have you found any antiques since I saw you? Have you any fresh treasure in your house to show me, Signor Mazzini?"

It was now Salvatore's turn to blush, but it was his soul which blushed, not his face. He had, indeed, some new antiques in his house; were her white-shod feet not standing on their hiding-place? Suddenly he longed to tell her, to stand before her as the man he felt himself to be, a man whose honour had been sacrificed for gain. Yet how could he tell her? It was because of her belief in him that her presence was sweetening his home, which lately had been almost unbearable to him.

"I have one or two small things, if you would care to see them, Signorina," he said nervously.

Salvatore placed the things before her on the table; she had seated herself at it. One was a vase with a red body ground, with a design in black round its neck and base;

between the two designs there were black horses of extraordinarily slender anatomy, ridden by still more attenuated, shield-bearing warriors; the other was a black drinking-cup, ornamented with red figures.

After examining them carefully, Christine asked Salvatore which was the older of the two.

He picked up a plain biscuit-coloured terracotta quaich, which he had just placed beside the others, and said, "That is the oldest of the three. Senta, Signorina, even in the prehistoric civilisations dishes of some sort were used. They were made by hand out of clay and dried in the sun. Gradually the people began to decorate them with roughly scratched designs; later on they discovered that oven-heat would make them more durable. Ovens are very ancient things, Signorina. Then the next development in the art was glaze. The red terracotta was glazed and the primitive scratchings gave place to more ornate patterns; later on figures and festival scenes appeared, which were all done in black glaze. Lastly came the idea of drawing the designs in outline on the vase before it was glazed and fired and then filling the background in with the black glaze, reversing the order of things. At the best period the glaze became smooth and fine, the figures became human and graceful. At that period the artists took a delight in their work and abandoned the archaic types and conventions." He paused. "But can you understand me, Signorina?"

Christine had followed him quite easily. He had spoken in English.

"Your English is so good," she said, "I understood everything you said. I am very interested—do please tell me more."

"I am very glad," he said gravely. "I have been studying my English."

Christine looked at the black designs on the vase she held in her hand. "I don't see how they managed to keep the lines so clear and delicate—the legs of those horses—

look at them! They are just as if they had been put on with an etching pen; and yet you say that the glaze was put on and these fines lines were left; they are the body colour of the vase."

"Si, si, Signorina, the horses and the conventional design are the natural body colour of the vase."

"What steady hands they had! I suppose they weren't stencilled?" Christine illustrated what she meant.

He shook his head.

"To keep the glaze from running must have been a terrible business!" Christine looked dubious.

"Certamente, Signorina."

"What a fascinating study—the glazing, I mean." She smoothed the surface of the vase with her finger tips.

"That is my special study, Signorina—the glaze of our old Caltagirone ware."

"Oh, do tell me about it! Are you trying to . . ."

He interrupted her. "Ah, Signorina," he said, "there is little to tell, but I do not think enough is made to-day of Sicily's and Italy's natural materials for pottery and fine glazes. It was the potters' clay of Ischia that served the famous potters of Cumae. For many centuries Italy was celebrated for her glazed potteries.

"I want to go to Ischia," Christine said enthusiastically. "It looks so beautiful, lying like a fairy fortress in the blue sea. I saw it from Capri. I must go."

"When I was little I lived there with my grandmother. It is a beautiful Island."

While they were talking Zita was knitting and smiling to herself. Salvatore was happy, happier than he had been since the two urns had been brought into their home, and it was she who had given him this pleasure! By telling a little lie, she had made Salvatore young again. Well, his happiness was worth a Mass.

As she took covert glances at Christine, she kept wondering to herself if La Primavera was really in love with the Signore, if she was going to marry him, and if she did, would he make her happy? She was so beautiful and gracious; surely no man could be unkind to her? Surely he would never tire of her fairness? To Zita it was wonderful.

She watched Salvatore. If only he had been born in better circumstances, what a fine lover he would have made for the Signorina! Seated at the table together they were well mated. Christine's pink skin and glittering hair were a fine foil for her companion's dark eyes and hair and classic features.

If love levels all things—as we are assured that it does—in Sicily Cupid's task is not a very difficult one.

A wonderful hour fled, fled so quickly that when Christine heard the cathedral clock strike seven she rose and hastily collected her things. She did not wish to go; her companion was interesting and charming, and he was in the middle of telling her how all vases as well as statuary figures probably had their origin in the human form. Primitive art took its inspiration direct from Nature. But she would only get back in time for dinner if she left at once.

As she put on her gloves Salvatore said, "Prego, Signorina, I can show you in the Girgenti Museum a primitive vase which obviously represents the trunk of the human body; on it are painted the legs, arms and head of the human being."

"I should like to see the museum," she said. "Could you spare time to go with me? But it closes at four o'clock—you couldn't get back in time." She looked sorry.

"There is Sunday, Signorina. I could show you many things which you may have overlooked or not understood."

They had stepped out into the street together; their faces were eager.

"If I can leave my aunt, I will come on Sunday. She dislikes museums; she only likes long drives."

"I shall be at your service, Signorina; if you cannot come I will go on with my work. It will be something to hope for."

They were standing in the street. Christine had begun her good-byes, which always take some time in Sicily.

"Prego, Signorina, the schoolboys may annoy you—they are very rough and troublesome in Girgenti. May I accompany you?"

Christine smiled. "I should like it," she said, "but what about your sister and your evening meal?"

Zita smiled encouragingly. "I will prepare Salvatore's supper and have it ready for him when he returns. Addio, Signorina, addio."

When they were alone they returned to the subject which had been interrupted by the striking of the clock, the inspiration of primitive art. Near the Villa Garibaldi Salvatore picked a leaf off a tree; neatly holding its sides and stem together with his thumb and first finger, he made it into a drinking-cup.

"Senta, Signorina, you will see many such dishes of sunbaked clay in the Museum, just like a leaf folded together at the sides and end. The point goes into the mouth—so," he opened his mouth to receive the pointed end of the leaf. "Many times I have used a leaf for a cup; it is very pleasant. If you fold up the other end of it, you see, you can make it into a saucer, which will hold oil and a wick; such saucers served for lamps and for incense."

"You have one before the picture of the Virgin?"

"Si, si. Probably it was in use five or six hundred years before the Blessed Virgin was born; it may have served the same purpose in one of the temples down there."

They were standing still. The leaf was in Christine's hands. Their eyes were interested only in each other when they were startled by the sudden and very near presence of a man. It was Count Zarano.

"I am going to the hotel, Miss Lovat. I can escort you home." He turned to Salvatore. "You can go back, Salvatore."

Salvatore's anger was roused; his pride was wounded. Why did the Signore speak to him just as he might have spoken to some paid city guide. Why had he turned up at that particular moment, when all the world was heaven and heaven envious?

With his coming had come also the memory of his own dishonesty. He visualized the urns with a horrible clearness lying under the hearthstone. His pale face flushed. He could say nothing; he recognized instantly that what Zita had said was true. From the night he committed the theft and for ever more he would be in the Count's power.

Christine turned to Salvatore; her eyes showed her regret. "Addio, Signor Mazzini," she said. "It was more than kind of you to come so far with me after your hard day's work, but as Count Zarano is going to the Hotel, you must save yourself the journey. Grazie ed addio." She smiled regretfully.

"Addio, Signorina." Salvatore's anger was impotent; he was tongue-tied and wretched.

"Addio until Sunday," Christine said again. "That is to say, if I can manage it."

Salvatore returned her sympathetic smile.

"What is to happen on Sunday?" the Count asked as they hurried down the hill. There was a new air of proprietorship in his manner which amazed Christine a little, even while it subtly pleased her. It made her feel "comfy" and inexplicably feminine; she was being appropriated in an almost "engaged" fashion. She wanted to laugh; it was so funny; the way her companion managed to express in no words at all that it was his right to protect and guard her. It was, she had to admit, extremely clever, if a little annoying.

Instead of laughing, she said, "I am going to the Museum on Sunday with Salvatore Mazzini. He is awfully interesting, isn't he?"

The Count looked at her suspiciously. His eyes became cruel. Christine did not see them, more is the pity!

"I hope the youth hasn't been thrusting himself on you. If he is forward just let me know."

"Forward? Of course he wasn't! And as for thrusting himself on me—I went to see him at his house. I enjoyed going."

"Please don't be angry with me, Miss Lovat. I know these Sicilians; I don't want you to be annoyed. When they lose their heads over a beautiful Englishwoman, they forget their position. Remember, this is the truth."

"Please don't say such things! You have spoilt everything. The man is so dignified, so polite." Christine looked distressed. "Besides, it is silly to speak of me like that. I am not beautiful, and you must think me an idiot if I believed you."

She spoke hotly; there was genuine annoyance in her voice.

The Count stopped. Christine's path was blocked by his sudden movement.

He stood directly in front of her and looking straight into her eyes, he said, "Miss Lovat, how could any youth who is human keep his head cool, his senses calm? Salvatore has eyes for human beauty, even if he lives in a cottage. I know what I am talking about; I know what I myself feel when I look into those blue eyes. If he does astonish you some day, he is not to blame."

"Don't be ridiculous! You are talking absolute nonsense!" Christine's heart was behaving abominably, but she spoke calmly. The man seemed in deadly earnest.

"It is not nonsense," he said, "it is only too true. That dear little nose of yours is not classic, but it is adorable; that wayward mouth is not Greek, but it is maddening. If you were more correctly beautiful you would not be Christine, you would not be the girl whose every fault is a charm. It is quite true that there is nothing classic about you, except your coloring, which to satisfy their caprice, the fairies stole at your birth from the asphodels." He gazed into the girl's astonished eyes. "That is not half the truth, not half of the song that is in my heart all day long."

Christine was trembling; her senses were bewildered. He had taken her completely by surprise. The moment before he had looked so unloverlike that her own foolish envy of the kiss he had bestowed upon her aunt's hand had flashed across her memory as an absurd piece of sentimentality. It was the fault of the Moonlight Sonata.

She made no attempt to answer him. Her girlish bewilderment delighted him; he had certainly touched her emotions, if her passions were still dormant.

"In Scotland it may take you months to learn what in Sicily we often learn in a few hours. Look at the vegetation; it will tell you the character of the people. Things grow up in a night; flowers bud and blossom and die long before they have made up their minds to awake from their winter of discontent in Scotland." His voice became calmer. "As your friend I am warning you. Salvatore Mazzini is just a nice young fellow, but in Sicily a beggar may look like a King! Human nature is the same in all classes; but remember that the men of his class have not the same command of their emotions."

"Thank you," Christine said. "I will remember." Her voice was troubled. The world seemed changed.

No more was said. The time was not yet ripe.

They walked on in silence. A high-wheeled cart, laden with purple cauliflowers, opportunely separated them for a minute or two. When they came together again the Count apologised.

"Forgive me, Miss Lovat, if I let my unruly member say things that I have struggled not to say. I will not allow it to repeat the indiscretion."

Christine smiled. "Of course I will forgive you, if you will not be so . . ." she paused.

"Yes, I promise, I will not be so . . ." He laughed happily. "Not yet," he said to himself, "not yet."

As he clasped the hand she held out as a token of friendship, he said, "I wonder what Sicily will teach you, Miss Lovat? I often wonder if you will carry back those same eyes to England. You, who are so eager to learn Sicily's past, to study her dead peoples, to link together her tattered story—how much will you understand of the humanity of her living? Will you ignore it altogether? Will you be content to remain in ignorance of the characteristics and passions of the people around you?"

"How can I study them," she asked laughingly, "if you say that I must not know them, if I may not enjoy the society of an intelligent and cultivated young man like Mazzini?"

"Is it quite wise to begin with a man of that class?"

"That class!" she said scornfully. "He is of no class! I hate the word 'class.' God just sends men like Salvatore Mazzini into the world in any class. He distributes the spirit of genius with an exquisite disregard for what you call class. Christ himself belonged to the class in which Salvatore Mazzini's material body moves." When Christine stopped speaking she became embarrassed. She had seldom expressed her feelings as strongly to the Count; she stood too greatly in awe of his learning.

"As you will, Miss Lovat, only don't spoil my intelligent workman."

"Of course I won't."

"Then you will not go to the Museum on Sunday? You will take my advice?"

"I will go to the Museum if my aunt can spare me." She paused for a moment and then said, "How beautiful his sister is! I don't think I ever saw a more beautiful girl. Did you?"

The Count's red-brown eyes never flickered as they looked into Christine's. She was watching him closely.

"Zita is almost perfect," he said. "It is a pity that these Sicilian girls fade and grow old so soon. She is at her best now. How old do you suppose she is, Miss Lovat?"

"Nineteen or twenty. She is so dignified and wise that she might be older, but I know they develop very early."

"She is just seventeen. If she marries soon and has a hard life, she will look old and wretched by the time she is twenty-four. In the working classes women are old at thirty. In Scotland they are not old at twice that age."

"How dreadful! Can't we save her?"

"I should like to," he said sympathetically. "She is worthy of better things." He spoke sincerely; but Christine did not realise what his idea of saving the girl meant.

"Surely if she has been educated she can work? She need not become a poor man's slave?"

The Count shook his head. "Sicilian girls do not work in the way you mean, Miss Lovat. The humblest of them is guarded and chaperoned and sheltered until some man comes along and asks for her hand in marriage. The girl is given in marriage, and she must give her husband many children, even if he has nothing to feed them on. And so they become old and their beauty is forgotten."

"Oh, but that little Greek girl must not live like that!"

"She probably will. She has no dowry, and she really belongs to the working classes, whatever her Greek ancestors may have been." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't bear to think of it," Christine said sadly.

"There is so much one cannot bear to think of in Sicily."

Christine looked at him. "Is my Laughing Land really a land of tragedy, a garden of tears?"

"There are the sulphur mines," he said, "and the general condition of the poorest classes won't bear looking into."

"And yet they are never filthy or degraded, like the poor in Glasgow and London."

"They are Nature's gentlefolk; even in their direst poverty they are self-respecting."

Before Christine's eyes new worlds and new ideas of life seemed to be quickly and sadly unfolding themselves.

There were so many aged poor people in Sicily that she had imagined that the people lived to a great age, that their outdoor life kept them strong and healthy. It was a shock to discover that these very aged people were scarcely older than her aunt, that the middle-aged ones were practically young women. She turned to the Count impulsively:

"Could I see over a sulphur mine?"

"Yes, if you would really care to see one, and if your aunt will allow you to make the excursion. It will be interesting, but not lovely, remember."

"I think I could get Miss Hudson to come with us."

"Ah, now you can't trust me! You won't go alone because I behaved like a foolish boy a minute ago."

"I never thought of that, I really didn't. But I don't believe Auntie would approve of a whole-day excursion together—it's different."

"Then ask Miss Hudson to come," he said. "It is not a beautiful sight; it is Sicily at its ugliest, but it is Sicily as truly as all this is Sicily." He pointed to the almond blossom on the hills.

"I ought to see her ugly side too, for I do want to understand Sicily."

"I wonder if you ever will?" he said. "Or if you will always look at it through rose-tinted glasses?"

"Am I so dense?" she said.

"Now it is you who are insincere," he spoke quickly. "You know I don't mean that. What I wonder is if you with your northern instincts and traditions and training, will ever really understand this complex and secretive people. I doubt it. Have you felt sufficiently? Do you know how true a thing it is that nothing ever dies? That nothing is without an influence? Sicily is all the things she ever has been rolled into one. In these peoples of apparently simple emotions, there are the racial instincts and characteristics of a long list of widely different invaders. Some of them were cruel usurpers, with amazing blood in their veins." He sighed. "Nature and man seem to have been allied against Sicily, for it has been tortured by its conquerers and has had to contend with Nature 'red in tooth and claw.' "

"My Laughing Land, my poor, proud Sicily."

"Yes," he said, "you are right—poor, proud Sicily."

"They have good reason to be proud," Christine said. "If I had to be reborn and I couldn't be Scots, I would be an Italian, which means Sicily too, of course."

"You aren't like most Scots women, who naturally distrust all foreigners, and who think the British Isles sum up the Holy Trinity of the world!"

Christine laughed. "I think my aunt did until she met you."

"Then you think I have found favour in her eyes?" He looked radiant. "I certainly did not in yours, when she introduced us, did I?"

"A good bridge hand can do a great deal." Christine ignored the latter part of his remark. "With bridge and music many rivers can be crossed." She hummed the air of the old song, "I built a bridge of Fancy." "My aunt seems to have forgotten that you are a 'foreigner,' that you were born east of the Rhine."

"Now you are laughing at me, Miss Lovat! But I am sincerely glad your aunt enjoys my music as much as I enjoy her society, for it gives me genuine pleasure to amuse a woman of her age, 'l'age dangereuese.' Middle-age is so little tolerated in the South, whereas old age is often tenderly guarded. A woman when she is no longer young, when she has lost her beaute-de-diable, has a poor time in the South—that is to say, if she has no children, or the social position and wealth which will assure her a certain kind of attention."

As Christine listened to him she said to herself, "This is the man who healed the suffering kid, this is the real man."

"Your aunt," he said, "has been very kind to me. For that I shall always be delighted to please her, whenever it lies in my power."

Christine's blushes told him that his words had been understood.

When they reached the hotel Mrs. Bullock greeted them in a harsh and acid voice. She was elaborately dressed and ready for dinner.

"What ages you have been, Christine!"

"Yes, I know, I have been perfect ages, Auntie! Do forgive me."

"I overtook your niece, Mrs. Bullock, and accompanied her. I know you agree with me that it is not wise for her to go about so much alone."

"I have told Christine—I feel certain she will be garrotted one day! I don't know how she dares to go so far from the hotel; I wouldn't!"

"If I was born without grace, Auntie, I was also born without fear. I just never think of these things."

"Then go and get ready for dinner and do put on something 'dressy' for a change—I'm tired of seeing you in shirt blouses."

"I'll do my best, but all my 'gay rags' are so abominably crushed that I can't wear them."

As Christine flew upstairs, two steps at a time, her slim feet scarcely seemed to touch the steps. She had already taken off her hat; she waved it over the banisters to her aunt, who was watching her.

"Such a tom-boy!" Mrs. Bullock said to the Count. "She ought really to have been a boy. I'm sure I don't know what sort of wife she will make!"

"She is a great treat in this country," he said. "I enjoy studying her type; it is so thoroughly British—half boy, half girl."

"There is very little to study so far, I fear. She throws all her interests and energies into things which can't do her any good or be of any use to her in the future. She is ignorant of all the things a woman ought to know; she is a hopeless housekeeper, absolutely hopeless." Mrs. Bullock's voice was tragic.

"But, my dear lady, you wouldn't have her different? Her innocence is her charm. Sicilian girls have a woman's knowledge in their cradles, it is born in them; they are never boyish. Whereas in your niece there is . . ." He shrugged his shoulders expressively. "There is the promise of . . . " He did not finish his sentence; it was wiser to change it. "She is still enjoying her girlhood, her womanliness will come in good time."

"I could do with a little more womanliness now! Really, she provokes me sometimes."

"I know what you mean," he said sympathetically. "Of course you naturally miss the exchange of thought with an awakened soul, a matured mind. How a woman like you must miss her husband!" He hazarded the remark. He knew that Mrs. Bullock had not been a widow long, but of her married life he was ignorant.

"You are right," she said, "nothing can take the place of a devoted husband." She did not tell him that the husband's devotion and their happiness had not been the result of her own unselfish nature. Christine's uncle had married the spoilt heiress of a wealthy Manchester manufacturer.

"Dear lady," he said, "I felt sure I was right." He put his hand lightly on hers. "Your niece could not possibly understand or fill the gap; the world is still her playground. Sorrow has not touched her, her womanhood has not suffered."

Mrs. Bullock's fine eyes softened; she felt profoundly sentimental. This man made her wish more than she had ever wished before, that she was fifteen years younger. The man beside her knew this, as he knew all the weaknesses and virtues of woman. And he was sorry for her. He knew that to this spoilt woman, who had once been attractive to men, it must be damnable to see Christine usurping the stolen glances and accepting with such simple dignity the open admiration of all the men in the hotel. Her golden youth, her superb vitality, and her boyish air of activity, never passed unnoticed. The man whose pulses were not quickened by the coming of Christine could not be called a man.

When Christine appeared, just in time for table-d'hote, she looked perhaps too feminine to please her aunt.

"Shall I do, Auntie?" she said laughingly. "I had to put on my best gown."

"You look more suitably dressed for dinner, anyhow," her aunt said good-naturedly. Mrs. Bullock was all smiles and good humour. The girl's lateness was forgotten, and she certainly was proud as well as envious of her looks.

The Count found a seat at their table, as he had done at many meals during the last few days, and during the course of the conversation he cleverly introduced the subject of how far it is safe to trust to first impressions as regards character.

"Can you trust to yours, Mrs. Bullock?" he asked. He only wished to hear Christine's opinion, which he hoped would follow her aunt's.

"I can generally rely upon my first impressions," Mrs. Bullock said. "I scarcely ever like a person whom I have not liked from the very first. I am seldom wrong."

"Oh, Auntie," Christine said laughingly, "what about servants? What jewels they have all been at first!"

"Don't be stupid, Christine. Servants aren't people—well, of course . . . you know what I mean. One never thinks about them like that, as people one likes."

"Can you trust to your first impressions, Miss Lovat?"

Christine raised laughing eyes to meet his. "I am not going to trust to mine any more," she said, "if that is what you want to know." Her apology was abject.

His eyes adored her. She had confessed herself mistaken.

"Christine is seldom right," Mrs. Bullock said. "I don't think she would be wise to trust to her first impressions;

they are generally unjust and sometimes romantically absurd."

"I should like to know if my first impressions about that beautiful young wife of the old American are right," Christine said. "Isn't she beautifully pale and sad? And I think she is bored to tears and sick of life generally."

The Count looked at the woman. "If she married him for his wealth I think she ought to play the game better, don't you, Mrs. Bullock? But then she is too lifeless for my taste—I'm afraid she doesn't rouse my sympathy."

"It is certainly very bad form to let all the world see how bored you are with your husband," Christine said. "And how dared she bring that old bridegroom to Sicily, of all places? She can't know anything about the gods and their love of jokes and sense of humour! I can see Pan jeering at them and planning his freakish tricks! But I don't suppose she knows the gods' games are our tragedies."

The Count's eyes met the girl's when she had finished speaking. "Fools step in where angels fear to tread," he said, "and there are no fools like old fools. You are too young to have lost your commonsense."

Later in the evening, when her aunt had secured two good bridge-players, Christine fled to her room. She was longing to be alone with herself, that new and bewildering self which was causing her so many surprises.

She tried to read, but did not succeed. Her thoughts allowed of no concentration. Only twice they wandered to the brother and sister in their little home up in the city. Salvatore she visualised mending his images, while Zita stitched or knitted by his side.

When she thought of Salvatore a sense of rest came to her, her excited senses were lulled. It was a feeling of spiritual sympathy and understanding, a feeling of which she was scarcely conscious. Her visualising of his quiet home and its innate refinement stilled the quickly-moving blood in her veins. To think of the Casa Salvatore was like laying her hot head on a cool linen pillow.

CHAPTER X

Up in the high city Zita and her brother had spent a strange evening. Salvatore had returned to his cottage with a white face; his slight body was trembling with rage. He flung himself down on his own seat beside the table. It was obvious to Zita that his happiness of an hour ago had fled completely.

"What has happened? Have you left the Signorina? You did not conduct her to the hotel?"

"I have been insulted," he said, "sent home like a dog. Corpo di Bacco! It is the first time I have borne such an indignity!"

"Sacra Virgine! And who has done it? Not La Primavera? You . . . you . . . oh, Salvatore! You did not, you never could have . . ."

"No, no," he said quickly, "grazie a Dio! she is an angel, she would not hurt an animal."

"Salvatore!" Zita's amazed eyes stared at him. "Then it was . . ." she paused, "it was the Signore?"

"Gia, gia, it was my accomplice in dishonesty. He told me to go home; he took my place beside the Signorina. I was not worthy to walk with her."

"Salvatore mio! Salvatore mio!"

"Yes, it has begun," he said harshly. "He would not have spoken to me like that two months ago. He must have known that the Signorina had given me permission to accompany her to her hotel. I am no low fellow or dog that I should be sent home."

"Salvatore, he is courting the Signorina; he follows her."

Salvatore's eyes searched his sister's face. "Come," he said, "how do you know?"

Zita did not answer.

"He stays at the same hotel. that's all."

"No—I have seen them together many times."

"That is nothing—English ladies go about alone with gentlemen."

"But I am sure that the Signore is courting La Primavera, and oh! Salvatore, I hope she will not marry him."

Salvatore's sense of justice returned to him. "If the Signore is in love with her, I can forgive his insult more readily. A man in love is not accountable."

"But does he love her?" Zita paused. "I must confess something to you, Salvatore mio."

"Confess?" He looked at her anxiously.

"This afternoon I left the house for almost an hour. I was with La Primavera; we went to the cake-shop; we drank chocolate and ate cakes together."

Salvatore smiled. He was glad and proud. The Signorina had been friendly with his sister; his wounded pride was healed.

"We met the Signore; he wished to join us, but the Signorina would not let him." Zita laughed mirthfully. "The young English ladies are very sincere; what they do not wish, they do not pretend to want. Dio mio! He was dismissed, Salvatore mio, and the best of it was that he wanted to dismiss me, I too was to go home."

"He was envious."

"Gia, gia, but the Signorina had invited me, she had insisted. And, Salvatore, I wanted her to come back to the house, to keep her here until you returned. I wanted to give you a surprise."

"Carina!"

"I did, Salvatore. I lied. I said I couldn't find the terracotta box, and it was there before my eyes. The Blessed Virgin understood, for all went well; you came home in good time. Oh, Salvatore, how wonderful she is! Her little wrist-watch, with diamonds all round it! Her beautiful blue eyes are angelic! Her golden hair, her stockings all of pure silk! She spoke of you many times. When she laughs a little dimple comes right here," Zita touched her own chin, "just here. It seems to me as if Cupid had left the shadow of his first kiss on her chin."

"Silenzio, carina mia!"

"The best part of it all was her dismissal of the Signore." Suddenly Zita's voice broke; she was crying, big tears fell from her eyes. "I wish they were not there," she sobbed as she kicked the floor with her foot.

"They are there," Salvatore said, "they are there. He would not have spoken to me one month ago in the way he did this evening if they were not there. His love for the Signorina is no excuse. He wished to rule. You are right—he is going to use me."

"I never trusted him, Salvatore."

"No, you never did," he spoke almost sharply. "But perhaps I am exaggerating; I was enjoying myself."

"All things have a meaning; time will explain all." Zita spoke ponderingly.

"If he cannot sell them soon, I shall give them up to the authorities."

"Why not give them up now? Oh, do, and let us be free!"

"The Signore has lent me some lire on them; I needed money for my work; it cannot wait indefinitely."

"Sacramento! He is a fox, he knew how to tie your hands."

"If my work is successful, nothing will matter, Zita. We shall forget this." He tried to speak cheerfully.

"Our father spent all his money on the same idea, Salvatore, and he died poor. Our mother had to work like a peasant; we live here like peasants."

Salvatore put his hands to his head as if her words hurt him. "Don't! Zita mia, don't destroy my hope! I must go to Rome."

Walls have ears, windows have eyes! Bats carry secrets! So Salvatore never mentioned the exact nature of his work.

Zita bent over him. "It is the Signore who robs me of my trust. I only fear that you will be the worker and that he will reap the gain."

"I have never told him! I trust no-one but you. I did not distrust the Signore; but," he shrugged his shoulders.

"You do trust me?"

He put his arm round her. "We are of one flesh, carina."

"Does he know that I saw the urns brought to the house? Am I also an accomplice?"

"Gia, gia. I did not tell him, but he knows."

Zita shivered. "He will order me as he ordered you!" Her hands were tightly clasped. "I hate him, Salvatore, I hate him and fear him."

"What have you to fear?"

"The unknown, Salvatore, the man's cruel power."

"Dio mio! You are so easily excited. After all, he only told me that I could return to my own house. If I had not been so happy with the Signorina I should not have noticed anything in his manner. I was jealous."

Zita shook her head. "I wish La Primavera had refused his company as she refused it when she was with me. I could have knelt at her feet."

"Bambina mia, she has won your heart."

"She is so graziosa. She was quite a friend to me, I who wear no hat on my head and have but two chairs in my house." Zita's eyes were mirthful. "I was her friend, her honoured guest. I could have eaten her, Salvatore; the sweet cakes were not so tempting as her skin—it is all pink. Dio mio! how dark I am!" Zita sighed. "How splendid it must be to carry about gold and silver in a little purse made of gold! And her bracelet, Salvatore—I counted fourteen large pearls, each one like a tear-drop. Her petticoat was much grander than her muslin dress; and her handkerchief, it was so fine that she put it into the palm of her hand under her big white glove. Dio mio! I laughed when I saw her pull it out. Outwardly she is so quiet and simple; inside she is like the King's daughter." Zita's rhapsody left her breathless.

Salvatore rose from her seat. "I must work. Stop chattering, carina." He pretended to be cross; as a matter of fact, his provoked senses could stand the girl's description of Christine no longer. He knew that he was madly in love with La Primavera, that her image had filled his thoughts for days; but he also knew that his love was hopeless. Only work could help him. Listening to his sister only increased his hunger.

The Signorina was as far removed from his daily life as earth is from Heaven. She was a tourist in Sicily, a chance patron of his wares. When she returned to England she would not even remember his existence.

The hopelessness of his love exalted it to a footing of sanctity. Even if one day he should become famous, if his experiment should prove successful, it would not help matters, for a girl so beautiful and wealthy would be married as soon as she was of an age. Salvatore imagined that Christine was about the same age as his sister. She was a girl in every sense of the word.

CHAPTER XI

On Sunday morning Zita went to mass with a neighbour and her daughter, a girl of her own age whose heavy bust would have better adorned a matron of forty-five. She was not prepossessing. Her complexion was heavy, her dark eyes were small and suspicious, her black hair fuzzy; her type was Saracen.

As she plodded along by her mother's side, her feet, which were cramped into very yellow kid boots with large pearl buttons, hurt. She felt so much grander than Zita that she had no envy in her heart for the girl's beauty. If beauty is married in the cradle, money is seldom an old maid; a dowry would gild her plain face.

Each Sunday morning she went to mass with her parents in the same sedate fashion, to an ancient church, tucked away in a corner; a church of so humble an order that the peasants living near it take their own rush-seated chairs with them, an old custom which saves the soldi charged for the church chairs.

Arrived at the piazza in front of the church, Signora Aldo was openly greeting her friends; her daughter was demurely answering secret glances from aspiring swains. Country donkeys and mules were lying on the ground or standing close to the church, with their reins attached to iron rings fixed in the wall. On festal Sundays a market was held in the square and portable shops surrounded it; on this Sunday there was only a rosary stall kept by a very old woman.

Just at the moment when Signora Aldo and Nina were pushing back the heavy leather curtain to enter the church, Zita, who was behind them, felt a thin roll of paper being thrust into her hand. Her heart beat furiously, as her mind leapt to the correct conclusion. It was her nameless deliverer; he must be behind her.

When the leather curtain had swung back and she was inside the building, she looked nervously round. He was in front of her, to all appearances totally unconscious of her presence. This was not her church; she had not told him that she ever went to it. Her own church was St. Biagio on the Rupe Atenea, a church made out of the cells of the temples of Ceres and Proserpine.

When Zita knelt in prayer her attitude was so devotional that no-one could have imagined that confusion reigned in her heart. Her deliverer had followed her; he must have watched her leave her house.

With Nina's sly eyes always watching, she had no chance of unfolding the note during service. The youth, according to the custom of the humble congregation, had seated himself on the male side of the aisle. Even in God's House sex is not fogotten.

Zita's senses were in no condition for prayers. Though her eyes appeared reverntly fixed on her prayer-book, her thoughts were romantically roaming. The youth knew it. For the language of the senses no wireless installation is necessary. Zita and her lover talked to each other throughout the service; they said the things which words were only invented to hide. The youth knew that his request had been granted.

He was a goodly youth, tall and strong and clean-limbed. While Zita knelt at prayer she could hear him playing his reed pipe; the air from "Rigoletto" was far clearer in her ears than the droning of the priest's Latin. The high altar, with its cheap furnishings, had vanished; the roof of the church had lifted. She saw the sunlight streaming over the mountains, the deep shadows resting on the plain. She saw the youth's blue-grey eyes laughing back into hers as he said, "If you do not sing, what noise was that you were making while I was playing? I call it singing."

She took another long look at him, while Nina was folding up her flower-bordered handkerchief.

"Surely Salvatore will approve? Surely this man is not like the Signore?"

When the service was over and the soldi had been collected for the seats, the scuffling of feet and the scratching of the chairs on the lava-paved floor began. The dispersing of the congregation was to Zita maddeningly slow. The youth had left the church. Zita and Nina followed closely behind Signora Aldo, who was pushing her large person past some worshippers who had come in for the second Mass.

When at last they stood in the sunlight, Zita caught the swift glance of her deliverer, who was untying the reins of his mule from the iron ring. Her glance took the youth in a transport of delight back to his home in the country. Up steep gullies and over lone mountain tracks Zita's smile brought songs to his lips and happiness to his heart. He envied no man. When hope runs high a long journey is short. Love knows no time. It is good to be young. While he rode on his nimble-footed steed his heart fed on Zita's beauty. Not once did he urge his mule on with the long-drawn-out Sicilian cry of "Amonine! Amonine!"

Such is love in Sicily, such is love in the Laughing Land, where truth is always stranger than fiction.

CHAPTER XII

When Zita was at last able to read her circumspect little letter a flood of happiness bewildered her. He was honourable, he was trustworthy; he asked nothing of her which need cause her the least shame or secrecy.

"Onorevole Signorina," it began, "I have waited. I can see no other way, so if you will permit me, I will call upon your brother and tell him that I have seen you and that I desire to pay my respects. With your consent I will take this step, which I will consider granted if you will sprinkle some white sand on your front doorstep to-morrow evening before six o'clock. May the good God bless you and favour my entreaty, gentle Signorina. Until death, yours respectfully and devotedly, Sardo Fontana."

The request made Zita quiver like a frightened wren. Certainly he was a bold and unconventional lover, but he was honourable and her awful episode with the Signore had not made him think lightly of her! She could rely on his discretion. He would convey the impression to Salvatore that he had seen her at Mass and had done as all Sicilians do when they are in love—watched for her coming and going after he had discovered her daily routine.

When she entered the cottage, Salvatore was still seated where she had left him at the table. His face was forlorn, his eyes wretched. Zita expressed her surprise.

"Did La Primavera not come?" Her voice was sympathetic. "Dio mio, I was sure she would!"

"No, I have been alone."

"She is with the Signore!" Zita stamped her foot with rage.

"Her aunt may have prevented her . . . it was only to be if she could get away; her aunt dislikes all museums."

"It is the Signore, he has prevented her! Oh, Salvatore, shall we never see her again?"

"Spero di si, Zita mia."

"I don't think we shall. He is jealous; he will prevent it."

"Silenzio! You forget! The Signorina is of the Signore's position; I am only a poor workman."

"You are an artist, she herself said so. She knows we are poor, but who could fail to see that fine blood runs in your veins? Everyone knows that you are a Mazzini."

"Through his influence I receive all that we put in our mouths. If he no longer needs my services . . ." Salvatore threw back his head.

"He will always require it. Who is there to fill your place? You are too humble."

"Zita, mia, no-one in this world is essential. Life will teach you that."

"You are essential to me, Salvatore. Without you I should die." Would the youth on his mule have ceased his singing if he had heard her remark?

"Men die and worms eat them, but it is not for love. The great English Shakespeare said that; it is true."

"But he did not know me, Salvatore—he was English. He did not know that in Sicily love can kill. What poor thin love he knew! In our country love is not mixed with water!"

He looked at her quickly, as though he had suddenly realised the fact, a strange fact to Salvatore, that his baby sister was now a woman.

"I must get a good husband for you, carina. You are of a marriageable age—I am forgetting my duty," he laughed. "Who is there that you fancy? Remember, you have no dowry, you cannot pick and choose. If you had a nice fortune like Nina Aldo what a fine match you could make, carina!"

Zita looked embarrassed. "I'm glad I'm poor; I'm not envious of black-browed Nina with her ugly feet. I do not wish to leave you."

"Santo Dio! But a girl must marry. And you are so pretty, that some fine young fellow may forget that you are dowerless. Who knows? Whom the gods love, fortune smiles on."

"He need not trouble, Salvatore. And I will not marry a dull old man just because I am poor, not if I have to become a licensed beggar at the church door." Zita's pride was up in arms.

"Perhaps you will be married for your money, carina. Every day it seems more likely; it is only money I need."

"I will be married for myself alone, Salvatore, or not at all."

"You have been reading English romances again," he said. "English love-stories give you these impossible ideas. What is the last called?"

Zita mentioned the name of one of Marie Correlli's novels, while she wondered what Salvatore would have to say, when he discovered that a handsome, well-off young man was only waiting for an opportunity to ask him for her hand in marriage. The mention of the book saved her further embarrassment. It never occurred to her that supposing she married her lover, she would no longer be able to share her old life with Salvatore. The fine patriarchal custom was familiar to her; it is greatly practised in Sicily. Salvatore stood to her in "loco parentis"; he would naturally make his home with her when she was married. The system is economical and labour-saving.

CHAPTER XIII

The next evening at about half-past five o'clock when it was drawing near the time for Zita to sprinkle the white sand on her doorstep, the Signore appeared at the cottage. Salvatore had not returned from his day's work. When she saw her betrayer standing at her door, Zita's blood turned cold in her veins. There was a new expression in his eyes. She waited for him to speak.

"Permit me to wait here for your brother, if he has not yet returned." He spoke respectfully and gently; she could not refuse his request. "I have something of importance to tell him."

"Please to enter, Signore." Zita made way for him to cross her doorstep; she had tried to block the entrance.

When he was in the cottage, he looked meaningly at the floor. "You guard your house very carefully, Zita mia! I seldom see you out of doors.

"Si, Signore."

Again he looked at the floor significantly. "Are they there? Did they arrive safely?"

"Si, si, Signore." Zita had edged nearer to the door, which the Signore had shut behind him.

He crossed the room and stood close to the girl; his eyes held hers. "Salvatore has made you his little watch-dog?"

Zita did not answer.

The Signore whispered something in her ear; he almost hissed the words. Then he added aloud, "You tricked and fooled me, Zita, because you were afraid of Salvatore. Now you know that you need not have been, that he must hold his tongue."

Zita was terrified but she said with dignity. "You mean, Signore, that he is now in your hands, that he will not dare to avenge his sister's honour. It is a lie! You are his accomplice, not his master, and I will tell the Signorina Lovat. She will hate you."

Her words brought her to his arms, her body crushed helplessly to his breast, her face bruised against the buttons of his waistcoat. Yet her strength was like the strength of a panther; it delighted her hunter.

"Little devil!" he said breathlessly. "You are jealous and afraid to take what you long to receive. And now you would destroy the Signorina's happiness!" He held her at arm's length and stared into her eyes. "Curse your intelligence," he said. "You think to be able to rob me twice!" To show her how mistaken she was he held her still more closely to him. Her breasts were crushed and sore. It seemed to the girl that the fallen Telamon had come to life; she was more helpless in his arms than an infant at its mother's breast. He raised her face to his. "Kiss my lips," he said; "kiss them."

To Zita the world had suddenly become hell, the devil was filling her cottage. If she did not kiss him at his bidding, what else would he take from her? She dared not cry out, for the neighbours would give small credit to her purity if they were to see her in the Signore's arms.

A thousand fears and terrors stormed her mind. The Signore's lips were still close to hers.

"Kiss me, Zita," he said again, "kiss me and swear that you will never speak to the Signorina again." His eyes threatened her with a heavier punishment. "Kiss me," he said again, more wooingly, "and make friends. The Signorina will not interfere with us, nothing need interfere; no-one need know."

Zita's horrified eyes questioned him.

"It would be wiser," he said, encouragingly. "Do as I tell you. Salvatore's secret will be safe; I will guard his honour."

"And my honour, Signore?"

"Yours?" he said. "Your honour already lies in my hands. Think, pretty Zita, whose story will be believed, yours or mine? You went with me to Porto Empedocle, that is sufficient. Even the English Signorina is not without jealousy."

"I am to buy my brother's safety?" Zita spoke quietly. "You wish to be my lover and I am not to tell the Signorina anything? I am to be your mistress until she becomes your wife . . . and what then?" The girl's face was pale, but all trace of fear had left it. The man's arms had crushed her until her body felt tired and broken.

"Marriage is one thing; a lover is another." He laughed, caressingly. "Madonnina, which do you prefer?"

"I will have both," she said quietly, "or neither."

"Sacramento!" he cried. "But you will have something! You made a fool of me once, you little witch, or so you thought, but you shall pay for it. Come, stop your nonsense and pretences."

He lifted her from the floor and took her in his arms. Salvatore's couch was in the corner of the room. As he carried her to it, a superhuman strength came to Zita, she became a tiger cat. Her sharp teeth dug into his hands, she spat into his eyes, so neatly that he had to stand still and grapple with her. Suddenly the house door opened and Salvatore entered the room.

For a moment there was an awful silence while the two men faced each other. The girl was weeping on the couch. The Signore smiled, the situation was a joke, easily explained. Salvatore would not make a fuss.

"Your sister was threatening me with blackmail," he said lightly. "She is jealous, poor child, of the Signorina Lovat. I was making a pretence of punishing her; she really deserves a whipping."

Zita's crying became hysterical.

"I have paid her a pretty compliment now and again, I admit, but this outburst is foolish. She is determined to tell the Signorina that I have been of use to you," he looked at the floor significantly. "If I pay attention to the Signorina Lovat she will take revenge that way. You will, I know, restore her to reason, calm her." He paused.

"You are a liar!" Salvatore replied. "A damned liar!" He spoke quietly, but his whole being was crying out for the man's blood.

"I am your master, young man; remember to whom you are speaking!"

"You are a liar and a scoundrel! I know only too well the man I am speaking to." Salvatore caught hold of his arm.

"Well, then, if you doubt me, ask your sister, ask her if she has not vowed that she will tell your secret to the Signorina Lovat."

Zita sprang to her feet; she faced Salvatore fearlessly. As he looked into her terrified eyes he asked himself if it were possible that she had seen more of the Signore than he knew? Did she really care for him?

"Give the lie to the Signore's foul words, Zita. Are these vile accusations true? Did you threaten him?"

There was a heavy silence for a moment and then the girl said slowly, "Yes, Salvatore, I threatened him, I spat in his eyes and I will do it again if he dares to enter your house."

Salvatore was too amazed and horrified to say more than "Sorella mia! Sorella mia!"

"Listen, Salvatore, he has begged me to love him, to deceive you; and he was to deceive the Signorina."

Salvatore sprang at the Count; he could have strangled him; if he had been carrying his revolver he would have shot him. Zita's cry stopped him.

"No, no, Salvatore, leave him. You need not kill him. He thinks the urns have tied both our hands, but he is mistaken! Because I refused what he asked he says I am jealous, hysterical. He knows your work depends on him; let him see that we prefer starvation."

Salvatore never doubted his sister's words. Instinct told him that she was speaking fearlessly and truthfully. But he knew that it would be foolish and useless to attempt at the present moment to take his revenge. The Signore was a much more powerfully built man than himself and he always carried a revolver; he was a reputed shot. Salvatore must wait; but a Mazzini can always wait.

Besides, there was Zita to be thought of. If he put himself in the hands of the law, who would support her? As these thoughts passed rapidly through his mind his grasp on the Signore's arm slackened; the murderous expression on his face changed—only slightly, it is true, but the Signore, with his quick eyes and senses, felt the subtle change.

When Salvatore's hand left his arm, he said blandly—he had adopted a bland tone throughout—"It is a pity that all this should have happened to-day, for I came to tell you . . ." He paused and looked at the ground.

Salvatore was silent. The Signore's looks were significant.

"This evening," he went on, "two American gentlemen will come to se your urns. They do not know, of course, that they are stolen goods. They can pay a fancy price." As he finished speaking, he turned to Zita. "You need not be a house-dog any longer, foolish child, if the urns please the American. He seems keen about them."

Salvatore's anger deepened. The Signore's words were meant to wound.

"They will he here at nine o'clock," the Signore said. He waited for Salvatore to speak. As he did not, he went on with his instructions. "You will arrange how they are to be conveyed down to his yacht, which will be in the harbour in the morning."

Every word maddened Salvatore. He longed to tell the man to leave his house, to refuse to listen to his orders or to carry out the transaction, but the chains of slavery held him. He was tongue-tied. The urns were in his house; the fact had to be faced, and the urns disposed of.

"Of course you will be responsible for the money, which the American will hand over to you when the urns are on the yacht."

"Your share as well as my own?" The words came from Salvatore's lips like pistol-shots.

"Yes. I have only advised him to look at the urns; he knows nothing about them, or how you got them."

"Then you are an honest man in his eyes? He does not know you!" Salvatore hissed the words.

"Salvatore Mazzini, do you wish to continue your work at the farm? If you do, hold your tongue. And I advise you to make your foolish sister apologise."

Salvatore threw back his head. "I take no more food for my stomach from your hands! I know you now for what you are, a lying Croat! If it were not for Zita, I would match myself against you this moment." His grip on the Signore's arm tightened.

Zita tried to calm him. "It is Government work, Salvatore, the Signore is paid by the Government. His money does not feed us."

Salvatore threw off her restraining hand and sprang to the door. As he opened it wide he cried out, "Get out! Get out, and never let your breath pollute this house again! My father's son will not forget the insult you have offered to his daughter."

The Signore moved slowly to the door. He only laughed as though he thought they were foolish, angry children, excitable Sicilians. He fully believed that Salvatore would appear at the farm next morning with his pick and spade. Sleep would cool his emotions.

As he stepped out into the street, he said to him, "You can bring the money to the farm when you have recovered your temper. I will trust you." His voice implied great consideration.

When the house door was shut, Salvatore seized his sister by the arms. "Tell me," he cried, "don't be afraid, tell me the truth. Should I have killed him? Must I kill him?"

Zita clung to him. "No, no, you saved me, Salvatore! You saved me! You need not kill him." She was trembling. Salvatore felt her body growing limp in his arms as he held her to him. Now that the Signore was out of her presence her nerve was giving way.

"Don't be afraid, sorella mia. He will not return. I will teach him who will laugh the longest."

"Oh, Salvatore, if you hadn't come! If you hadn't come!"

Zita was sobbing and shaking. Salvatore did his best to calm her and she found comfort and assurance in his enfolding arms. When her trembling grew less he said:

"How long had the villain been here, Zita mia?"

"Almost twenty minutes, I think." She started in his arms and tried to free herself; her trembling returned. "What time is it now?" she asked miserably.

Salvatore heard despair in her voice. As he told her that it was just six o'clock her head fell on his shoulder.

"It is too late, too late, too late, Salvatore mio!" Her words were a moan.

Salvatore laughed at her distress; she seemed hysterical.

"Why, bambina, it does not matter—if it is too late to kindle the carbon we can eat cipolli." He sighed. "This day week we shall have no carbon to burn, Zita mia. Don't make yourself unhappy over my supper."

Zita raised tear-washed eyes. She had not thought of kindling the carbon; their supper was forgotten. What she had suddenly remembered was that it was six o'clock and that Sardo Fontana would have passed and found no sand on her doorstep. Yes, he must have passed. He would be on his way home now, believing that she was, after all, only a light girl, that she had tricked and fooled him!

. . . .

What happened was this. Sardo Fontana, after leaving his mule at the entrance of the town, had walked quickly up the long street. He knew where Zita lived; Casa Salvatore was easily found.

As he strode along his heart was light with hope, for love disperses all fears, and he had a clean record to give Salvatore and a goodly inheritance to offer his wife. All was right with the world. His thoughts danced round the girl's image. One moment he saw her as his wife, at home in her place as the mistress of his house, her first-born child at her breast. The next minute she was shyly accepting his first kiss, which would of course be after their marriage. The next minute she was signing her name as a bride before the Sindaco. How beautiful Zita Fontana sounded to his ears! He had of course discovered her name.

Now they were on their primo mese di matriminio—honeymoon. He could see her lovely eyes and laughing lips, expressing their wonder at the sights of a great city, Naples. His thoughts were a lover's, but a lover who respects as well as loves the woman he desires. She was to be his wife, the mother of his children; his thoughts did no dishonour to her chastity. For a mistress, however much adored, a man has other thoughts! In the South they are not confounded.

Sardo disliked the town; he was country bred; his father's ancestors had lived on the same farm for many centuries. A degree of pity for a girl like Zita, who was compelled to live in the ugly, noisy street, cast a temporary cloud over the brilliance of his world. He would take her away, away from it all, from the dust and squalor and vulgarity of modern Girgenti. He hated the upstart youths who paraded the streets after working hours to show off their cheap German clothes and flashy yellow boots and stared at the women with bold eyes. He hated the girls who covered their fine heads of hair with ridiculous hats and stuffed their fat figures into ill-fitting modern clothes.

Sardo Fontana was his own master. He had inherited his farm from an uncle who had also made money in the

Argentine. Zita would have no mother-in-law, which meant that during their early married life he could spoil her and spend as much money on her as he chose. Happy Zita!

As he approached her house he looked around. He was in luck; no-one was in sight. His heart was beating excitedly. He felt sure that inside the little house Zita was conscious that he was outside. At the door he stopped.

Was he blind? There was no sand on the step—not a single speck.

He stood still. In a moment the brightness of his world changed to blackness. No, there was no sand; there was no acceptance. Love always finds a way, he knew that. Zita could have managed to find time and the means if she had wished to. It was such a simple matter, such an everyday matter. But the step was white and sandless. Obviously she had refused his request.

He examined the windows opposite. No eyes were looking, no jealousies were lifted; the street was empty. He knelt on the step and put his ear to the door; he heard voices. With a beating heart he put an eye to the keyhole. By doing so he was able to see the whole interior of the room.

As he looked the hot blood in his veins ran cold. Misery stabbed his heart. There were two people in the room, Zita and a man. And Zita was in the man's arms. That was all he needed to see.

That the man was the girl's lover there could be no doubt. And he was a Signore. Sardo's ideals were killed before he rose from his prying position. His young world had become old and cold and sinister. Perhaps he was going mad? This girl had seemed to him as pure as the Virgin Mother. He would have sworn that her flight from Empedocle was genuine, and not a clever pose or an intrigue. Now he knew that he had been fooled. The girl had been with her lover; why she had jumped on to his cart from the window he could not explain to himself.

Probably she had stayed too long and she saw no other means of getting home.

He laughed savagely. A cheated Sicilian is an ugly thing. Sardo had been cheated and fooled. The girl was bad and deceitful. And yet he cursed the man who had taken her from him. In his thoughts she had lived with him as his tenderly-loved wife ever since she had dropped from heaven on to his cart. She had become a part of his existence. Each day's work had been done for her, each song he had sung had been sung to her, each lamb born on his farm had been a promise of her first-born son, her helpless babe feeding at her breast.

Now she had made all fair women false and accursed. "Tesoro mio," he cried, "you are to be cast out of my thoughts, you are to be one with all the other women of the town, whose love is for sale!"

Even as he said the words he scorned them. Surely those dear eyes had seen fear? He could hear her clear voice singing "Caro nome"; he could see her perched up on her seat of green rushes. Must his thoughts no longer reverence her? Was she a creature to be enjoyed and played with, then cast aside? Motherhood would never set its crown upon her beauty.

These thoughts crucified his flesh and stained and shattered his ideals as his hurying feet carried him far from Zita's sandless door.

In such a way was Zita robbed of a devout lover.

CHAPTER XIV

In the Casa Salvatore the Greek urns were on the table; two strangers were gazing at them with admiring eyes—or rather, the elder of the two was examining them minutely, whilst the younger man was only making a pretence; his eyes were stealing quick glances at Zita.

The crevices of the window shutters and the door had been plugged with cotton wool, the door had been locked from the inside.

Mr. George A. Langbridge, the possible purchaser of the urns, was a dignified, good-looking, elderly man, with a singularly clean and attractive personality. He was unmistakably an American gentleman. His son, who was not so good-looking, had a sterner face, though the expression of his mobile mouth was humorous and his eyes when he smiled were reassuring.

Mr. Langbridge turned to Salvatore and said almost reverently: "They are more beautiful than I expected; they are worth much money. But you know of course that we are not allowed to take antiques out of Italy."

"Si, Signore, but many go."

Mr. Langbridge smiled. "I want these vases. They are worth twice the money you are asking for them."

Salvatore threw back his head. "I shall be glad to get the sum I mentioned, Signore. I will not go back on my word; I should not sell them if I did not require the money."

The youth's voice hurt the fine sensibilities of the American. He looked at him keenly.

"Count Zarano fixed the price," he said. "I didn't beat him down. I left all arrangements to him."

"I understand, Signore. I need money; I shall be well paid."

The American's eyes travelled round the cottage. Had so much pure beauty ever before been gathered in so small a space?—the Greek urns, the beautiful girl, the classic youth?

Apart from the urns, the contents of the room could have been bought for a few pounds. The sheepskin in the corner obviously covered a bed; did the youth whose movements made his own feel clumsy, sleep on it, he wondered?

Mr. Langbridge came of Quaker stock. He did not know that he was buying stolen goods, but he did know that he had no right to take antiques out of Sicily or Italy without the permission of the Government. This seemed to him an unjust law; America needed the refining influence of classic art more than Italy. Italy had plenty of antiques.

"These urns were a great find," he said to Salvatore. He had to say something while his mind was seeking for a means by which he could better pay the youth for his treasures. There was something about Salvatore which prevented him from actually offering him a higher price than the sum asked. An idea came to him suddenly. He could add considerably to the cheque by paying him a large sum for taking them down to his yacht; nothing had been said about that.

At first Salvatore refused the sum he offered, but the Signore said it was not too much for the risk he was taking; he would not let him do it for less.

"I should like very much to know," he said, "if you won't think me merely curious, what you are doing—I mean, what is your ambition? Count Zarano told me that you spent your leisure hours over scientific research."

"Si, Signore, I am deeply interested in the lost art of glazing." Salvatore instinctively trusted the man who was going to smuggle the Greek urns out of the Island; but he did not mean to divulge his secret to him.

The American's eyes kindled. "That amazing Egyptian blue faience, perhaps? It is a lost art."

Salvatore bowed his head. "The iridescent glazes of Italy and Sicily are to me more interesting."

"And you want money for your work? That is why you are selling the urns?"

"Si, si, Signore. I wish to go to Rome. I shall go if I can manage to get the urns down to your yacht safely."

"You think you can manage it?"

"Spero di si. I will try." Salvatore's eyes were gleaming, but his face was very pale.

The American took in every detail of his appearance—

his delicate fingers, his finely-chiselled ears and classic contour of throat. He next entered into a discussion with him regarding the exact time and place for the delivery of the urns on his yacht.

As all their conversation had to be carried on in English it took a long time to complete the arrangement. Meanwhile Zita had been answering the questions of the younger man. He could speak Italian with fluency. As a contractor in America he employed a large number of Italian workmen; he had an Italian overseer; he understood Italians and liked them; he respected their intelligence and industry.

When Zita had told him about her brother's work as an excavator, she answered simply and intelligently all the questions he asked her, about the conditions of the sulphur miners, their wages and their hours of work.

He was of course talking to her more or less for the pleasure it gave him to look at her, for in no other way could he have looked at her so much. He did not mind how long his father took to settle about the vases. What a strange country Sicily was! Only that very afternoon they had walked through the back streets of the town, where they had seen so much ugliness and wretchedness that he had flown from them in horror. Now the girl and her brother, in their whitewashed cottage, showed him the other side of the picture, a contrast which is peculiarly Sicilian.

. . . .

When at last the business was finished, the lengthy "addios" had been exchanged and the Americans were walking down the street, the younger man said eagerly:

"My, dad! But there's some beauty in that cottage."

Mr. Langbridge smiled. "Some beauty, as you say, Waldo. Isn't this an astonishing country? Doesn't it show that nothing ever dies? Those children are as Greek as their urns."

"I was sorry to say good-bye, weren't you?"

"I'd like to do something for the youth. The puzzle is—what can one do?

The younger man laughed. "I'd like to do something with that girl! My goodness, she's hard to beat! She's a peach, she's a beauty."

I shan't get you safe back home, Waldo—I can see that."

"She's taken my fancy right enough."

"They are both worthy of better surroundings. But the young man's going to Rome, he says. He's got sound ideas; he's no fool."

"What about?"

"Glazes and hard cements and so forth."

"He has, has he? It's cement he's after? Is this excavating only a sideshow? Roman cement for ships will make someone's fortune."

"Yes, so far as I could gather, but it was not easy for me to follow him; sometimes his English puzzled me."

"Have you arranged about the urns?"

"Yes. He'll take then down to Porto Empedocle. They will go on board as oil jars. They will be all right—trust a Sicilian!"

"I hope you won't be stopped and searched on the high seas."

"Little likelihood—they have never been seen by anyone except that girl and the Count. It's not like a celebrated picture or even a fine piece of furniture."

"I don't trust that dago Zarano. That nice Scots girl is ways too good for him."

"Why, Waldo, I rather enjoy his society. He's very cultured and clever."

"A rogue in six languages, if you ask me."

"Is that so? He speaks English like an Englishman, and apart from his better manners, he might pass for one. He's a very fine musician."

"I wouldn't mind betting you that he's going to get his 'squeeze' out of that young excavator, a pretty big one, too."

"You don't mean that?" Mr. Langbridge's blue eyes looked wonderingly at his son. "He seems a gentleman; he spends his money pretty freely."

"How does he make it?"

"This archæological work appears to be a hobby, the work of a gentleman of leisure and money."

The younger man laughed. "There aren't many men of leisure and money amongst his countrymen."

"Isn't he an Austrian aristocrat? Aren't they the gentlemen of Europe?"

"He prefers to be called an Austrian because Croats are liked even ten degrees less than Austrians in Italy. The feeling against Austrians is really not personal; it's political. Austrians are gentlemen and Italians like them. It is the Austrianized Croat that their soul abhors. And little wonder! The Austrians have always used them as tools against Italy; they have done Austria's dirty work."

"Then you think Count Zarano is a Croat? I know nothing about Croats; I know there is a rabbit-warren of Balkan peoples in south-eastern Europe, troublesome people, but I couldn't tell you one single thing about any of them."

"You'll be able to tell more some day, or I'm mistaken."

"Is that so?"

"Why, certainly. Education with these people is going to act like manure in a forcing-bed; it's going to bring forth much fruit. Time will prove what the harvest will mean."

When they reached the entrance to the hotel grounds they caught a glimpse of Christine and the Count.

"Look!" Waldo Langbridge said. My Croat is instructing pretty Miss Lovat in the mystery of the heavens." His voice was bitter.

His father looked for a moment before he saw the two figures. "You are jealous, Waldo. He's only doing what any other young fellow would do if he had the chance. Miss Lovat is very much to my liking. I admire her good style and freshness, don't you? She is a lady—and that's saying a very great deal in these days."

"Given the same chance, that little Greek girl would wipe the floor with her." He paused. "In Scotland there are many Miss Lovats; I doubt if even in Sicily there are two Zita Mazzinis."

"Miss Lovat is a woman we can understand, Waldo; she's a woman of our own Anglo-Saxon blood. That little girl might as well be the replica of a Greek coin as a human being. She's one of Nature's gentlewomen, but I doubt if I could ever understand her."

"A Greek statue spoilt by clothes."

"Just so! Now Miss Lovat can look like a wood nymph, but in my thoughts she can be transformed into a possible wife and mother—and I suppose that is how we ought to sum up women—possible wives and mothers."

Waldo Langbridge laughed. "Italians always see in young womanhood possible mothers of children."

"Do they?"

"In the women they respect, I mean."

"It's a good foundation for matrimony, Waldo. What do you think?"

"Anglo-Saxon love takes a mighty lot on trust. Our men will marry any kind of a girl if they are sufficiently in love with her. The good wife and mother of his children idea comes precious little into his calculations. I think statistics would prove that the Italian principle is the sounder."

The two men stood still. The heavens held them. The stars at the moment seemed too many for the night sky; some of them fell to earth.

"Waldo, my boy, 'On such a night did pretty Jessica.' Don't you think that climate has a mighty lot to account for? These fireflies flitting through the air like golden needles; that scent of orange-blossom coming from lovers'

Edens; the subconsciousness that those pagan temples are standing over there in that holy calm. . . ." He laughed softly. "Why, at your age I'd have proposed to half-a-dozen girls on a night like this."

"In spite of the wife and motherhood business, father?"

"Under these stars any sort of woman would appear perfect; the stars and the moon are beautifiers. My! But it's a dangerous land, a dangerous, delightful land. I must get you out of it, Waldo."

"I'm not going, Siree. It suits me very well. Besides, I want to see a 'tunny batto.'"

"Well, I don't feel as if I wanted to. They tell me that the sea runs blood like a battlefield; it's a gigantic shambles on the high seas."

Christine and her companion Count Zarano were standing on the terrace which overlooked the great plain. They were standing side by side looking at the stars, their heads thrown back, the clear light of the moon lighting up their faces.

The two Americans stopped; their coming had not been heard; for a moment they watched the lovers spellbound.

They were a goodly couple. Suddenly and as if by instinct their upturned heads were turned to each other, their lips met. The action was so natural and so beautiful that the onlookers felt the same reverence for Christine's devout kiss as they would have felt in the presence of the dead. Americans are sentimental.

"Come on, Waldo," his father whispered, "let's get away. We are on holy ground."

"I hope the Count thinks the same thing."

"Why, man, you can't doubt it! That was the genuine article."

"To a man like the Count a woman's kiss can so often be the genuine article. However, it's no business of ours, so let's turn in."

CHAPTER XV

Mrs. Bullock simply put her foot down. Christine did not go to the Museum.

Of course Count Zarano had been at the bottom of it, but she did not know that. He had told her aunt that for Christine to go to the Museum and walk about alone with Salvatore Mazzini was neither wise nor really kind to the hot-blooded youth.

"I have seen these things tried," he said, "and invariably the English girl has been sorry for her thoughtless conduct."

Christine did not dispute her aunt's command. She had been brought up conventionally, and although Salvatore Mazzini was an artist he was not socially her equal; she had not thought of him as she thought of Count Zarano.

Instead of going to the Museum she had driven up to the town and attended high mass at the cathedral with her aunt.

That was only a few days ago. But much can happen in a few days at such a critical epoch in a girl's life. Christine was living quickly and vitally; each hour counted, each day called her swiftly to greater things. She was so inwardly happy that it did not matter very much what she did. It was all Sicily, and three or four times each day she had the excitement and pleasure of being with her lover. Through his clever devising there was some romantic pleasure to look forward to every evening.

She had known him for less than a month, yet it seemed years since she had felt any mistrust of him and misjudged his character. The thought of it made her angry with herself. She was now willing to trust herself to his keeping for the rest of her life, and her life was to be a glorious one. He was to take her to Egypt and to Syria and to

Greece. They were to live in the desert until they felt the call of the world, the desire for other society than their own. Then they were to go to Vienna and Paris and Rome.

Christine never questioned her lover's worldly riches, his ability to do all these things. He had asked her to marry him, so of course he could afford to keep her in comfort, if not in great luxury. With her aunt she had every luxury, but her London life bored her. Her own small income, a colonel's daughter's pension, which would of course cease at her marriage, scarcely did more than pay for her taxi fares. But her aunt liked to take about with her a pretty, well-dressed niece who did her credit; every penny she spent on the girl was spent for her own satisfaction. She was an intensely selfish woman.

Christine was ridicuously happy. A lover in Sicily—and such a lover—made the enchantment of the Laughing Land complete. He made her heart sing with delight from morning until night. He taught her how poor a thing her life had been before he had come into it. Things which were beautiful were a thousand times more beautiful when seen through a lover's eyes. A newborn pity for all unloved things made her more womanly. But as yet she did not know the difference between being romantically in love with Love and being in love.

. . . .

They were doing the sulphur mines. A chaperone had been found and also another sightseer, who made a welcome fourth. For the time being Waldo Langbridge put his prejudice in his pocket. He wished to see a sulphur mine and he imagined that Christine would prefer a partie carée. But his dislike for the Croat had not diminished.

They had taken the train from Girgenti to the mining centre of Serradifalco. From Serradifalco to the mine they rode on donkeys. Long before they reached the station Christine knew that they were in a sulphur district and that Sicily had turned her ugly cheek to them. They were in a barren land where nothing grew, and nothing could live. It was as ugly as any Inferno pictured by Dante. Instead of fields of blood-red sanfoil, pink lupins and orange-coloured marigolds, which they had left behind them, she could see absolutely nothing but what looked like gigantic anthills of a pink and greenish colour. They were the "tailings," as the rubbish-heaps of mines are technically called. Here and there a monster chimney reared its ungainly head and belched out smoke into the sky. In the far distance there were blue and lofty mountains.

They were in a world abandoned to sulphur. Sulphur mines have a way of looking as if they were disused, an appearance which adds to the natural desolation of the scenery. Mine-owners are compelled to purchase the land for nearly a mile round the area of the mines, because the land is rendered valueless. Everything was very grey and still and oppressive and of course destitute of shade. Now and then a white falcon flew high over their heads in its ardent desire to reach the sanctuary of the blue mountains. In the distance Christine could distinguish trains of sulphur-laden mules winding their way in and out of the hills. They looked like trails of ants migrating to some fresh colony.

As they approached the valley where the mine, which had been worked continuously for two hundred and fifty years, lay, fumes of sulphur caught their throats and hurt their eyes. The landscape became even more desolate. There were no longer the distant hills to remind Christine that she was riding through the playground of the Gods. She coughed and rubbed her eyes. The Count was riding by her side; he had been watching her closely.

"The air is not really very bad to-day," he said, "because in the spring the fires which heat the little kilns for melting the ore, and which are never allowed to go out, have to be kept very low. The fumes must not travel more than six miles."

"What must it be like in winter, if this is not bad?" A fit of coughing stopped her speaking. Presently she said, "What did you say the fires were for?"

"To smelt and burn the ore. These 'gill fires,' as they are called, keep on lighting themselves, which means an enormous saving of labour. The man who invented them was called Gill; he came from the Isle of Man, which perhaps you don't know has for its crest three legs, just like the Sicilian Trinacria. You will see the yellow sulphur pouring out of the kilns into flat pans. When it is taken from the mines it is in a perfectly dry condition, of course."

Later on Christine saw the liquid sulphur, which poured out of the kilns like a golden stream of toffee. And far down in the bowels of the earth, she saw men hacking it out of its bed in the rocks. She saw wonderful sights in that dark cool underworld, which came as a relief to her tired body and burning feet, for the ground above the mine was hot and soft; an amazing world full of busy men and singing boys.

And now the adventure was over; they were again on their donkeys and on their way back to the station. But Christine could still see the half-naked men hacking out the ore in small chambers, which were lit by safety-lamps, their bright eyes and pale skins showing clearly in the dark surroundings. She could hear the "carusi" (boys) singing old mining songs, as they pushed their ore-filled waggons along the narrow gauge line which ran along the galleries. She could feel again her lover's hand seeking hers whenever an opportunity occurred. How she had loved him for remembering her!

The whole thing had astonished Christine. She had been told by Mr. Langbridge that she would see child-labour, with all its horrors. Instead of which, she had seen boys, singing and joking as they pulled trucks of debris along smoothly laid lines. It had shocked her to hear the overseer boast that the best-paid miners could easily earn two shillings per day, a day which began at six a. m. and ended at six p. m., for if she had been offered a year's wages she would not have gone down the mine again.

While she was riding and thinking these thoughts, something was vexing her much more than the economic conditions of the miners.

The donkey-boy who was running behind her was every now and then urging on her animal by jagging its flesh at the most sensitive parts of its body with the sharpened point of a nail, securely fixed into a short thick handle of wood. Each time he jagged it the donkey threw up its hind legs and scuttled on quickly for a few paces.

More than once she had tried to make him give her the nail, but when she questioned him he made a pretence of having done nothing to the animal. He had nothing in his hand, it was not his fault. The English Signorina might belong to the English Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which as he knew had insisted upon the Italian authorities prohibiting the use of these primitive instruments of cruelty.

At last Chrstine called out to her lover; she could endure it no longer.

"What is the matter, sweetheart?"

The Count had ridden back to her; he was on a very fast mule.

"That wretched boy is stabbing my donkey with one of those sharpened nails, and he won't give it up—he says he hasn't got one. Do make him give it to you." Christine's eyes pleaded. "He is spoiling my day, and I'm getting so tired and cross."

"You darling!" her lover said sympathetically. "But the donkey will probably refuse to move if I take it."

"Oh no it won't! Do take it! I can't bear it any longer. It was going quite well. He's just a cruel little wretch."

The Count looked at the sun. It was sinking; he knew that they had just time to catch the last train to Girgenti.

The boy gave the donkey another dig. Up went its heels and Christine almost went over its head.

"There!" cried Christine. Isn't he too fiendish? If you love me, dearest, take that hateful thing from him."

"You will risk the consequences?"

"What consequences?"

"It will crawl for the rest of the way. They get accustomed to such treatment and won't go without it."

Christine looked annoyed and disappointed. "I don't mind if it does crawl—anything rather than such abominable cruelty. Surely you long to thrash the little villain?"

"The animal has not got your skin, remember.

"I am sitting on it," she answered coldly, "and I can feel it shrink and wince. It is nonsense to say it doesn't feel."

The desolation of the sulphur-fumed country, the fatigue of the day's excursion, were having their effect on the girl's nerves.

Her lover saw her strained expression, the forlorn eyes; she was almost hysterical.

He called the boy to his side; at his stern bidding the caruso handed over the nail. This made Christine still more annoyed; the boy had refused to give it up to her. She urged the animal forward until it was abreast of her lover's mule.

"Let me see it," she said. "What sort of hellish thing is it?"

This was a new Christine to the Count, who silently handed her the nail. It was discoloured with blood and covered with matted hair.

"Look!" she cried. "Look! You can see how the poor animal must have suffered."

Her lover did not seem moved or excited; he had witnessed worse deeds from donkey-boys. Christine's eyes expressed both horror and surprise. Was this her lover? The tender shepherd who had bound up the limb of the suffering helpless kid? She raised her arm high above her head and flung the nail as far away as she could.

"There!" she said. "How I'd love to see you soundly thrash the little beast, or at least feel as I do about it."

"What good would it do? He thinks you are both ignorant and mad; in his opinion animals have no souls. It is through our souls that we suffer, our souls raise us above the level of animals. He thinks you are very ignorant not to know that; but you are only a Protestant, a heretic."

"They know quite well that animals feel," Christine said, in a dry voice, "else why should jabbing the donkey make it go?"

Her donkey's pace was degenerating into a slow walk. She urged it on, but it paid no attention to her humane efforts. Soon the distance between her donkey and her lover's mule grew greater and greater. They were both a considerable way behind the rest of the party, who were riding along the track in Indian file.

With a sinking heart she tried desperately to make the animal quicken its pace by pulling the reins, by pressing her heels against its sides, by cries, threats and entreaties. But nothing had the slightest effect on the tired animal.

"Amonine! Amonine!" She tried to imitate the long-drawn-out Sicilian cry. But if the animal recognized it, it ignored it; its head sank lower and lower until it was almost between its forelegs; it was scarcely crawling.

She called out to the boy to come and make it go more quickly. He ran close up to it and gave such a yell that Christine almost fell off its back. The donkey only switched its tail and the boy did not attempt to do anything more.

Her lover was now far ahead; his mule wished to pass the others.

The boy was enjoying himself immensely. The Signorina would miss her train; she would soon find out her folly. He gave another appalling yell; it echoed round the desolate hills. But this time the donkey did not even switch its tail; it could not have gone slower without stopping altogether.

Tears of helplessness and rage were swimming in Christine's eyes. She was angry with the world; the country which she was going through was an inferno; the boy at her side an impudent grinning little devil; her lover was unsympathetic. Sicily was indeed showing her ugly face.

. . . .

The Count looked at his watch. The girl had learnt her lesson. He turned his mule, and digging his heels into its ribs, in a minute or two he was at Christine's side. He was no lover, but one to be obeyed.

"Get off your donkey quickly—there is no time to lose. You must ride my mule."

He had flung himself off and put his arms round Christine. But they held no caress. A delighted grin made the boy's ugly face comely.

"Now jump!" her lover said, as he held her slim foot in his hand. "And we must go like the wind or we shall miss the train."

He sprang up behind her and called out, "Amonine! Amonine!"

They were off together, off like an arrow shot from a bow. The mule was at last allowed to pass its distant companions if it could.

Christine was breathless and tired. She had no idea that a mule could go at such a pace. Her lover heard her quick breathing; he felt the tension of her body.

"Now you know, sweetheart, why I did not give you my mule to ride. It would have bolted with you; I have had my work cut out holding it back."

They were quickly gaining on the advance party. Christine was beginning to feel less miserable, although she was also beginning to think that she had made a fool of herself. She was too tired to speak, but her lover's presence was soothing. To be so close to him was exquisite. He kissed the back of her neck, where bright little curls flirted with her ears and throat.

"I was so miserable," she said humbly. "You seemed all of a sudden to have changed into the man I distrusted and was afraid of." She laughed softly, as he stole another kiss. "How long ago that seems now! And I never told you why I suddenly knew that I had been all wrong."

"My angry Christine, my tired little girl. I knew you thought me heartless. But we must hurry, or we shall miss the train. Personally I should like to ride like this to Girgenti, or to Kingdom Come, but I must think of you."

"Are we late?"

"If you hadn't mounted the mule, we shouldn't have caught the train."

"Was I so nearly missing it?" she laughed happily.

"It would have been pretty awful," he said. "As it is, we haven't a minute to spare."

The mule had slackened its pace. He urged it on, and with a few swift strides it was almost abreast of the leaders of the party.

"Is there no other line, no other train to Girgenti?"

"No. You would have had to stay here all night."

They had made up on the others and no more was said on the subject; but it gave Christine plenty of food for reflection.

Waldo Langbridge was the first to speak to them as they cantered up on the one black mule.

"Ah! There you are at last!" he cried. "We were getting anxious."

"After I made my boy hand me over the horrible thing he was jabbing my donkey with it refused to budge. I should certainly never have caught the train if Count Zarano hadn't come to my rescue and given me a lift on his mule."

Waldo Langbridge laughed. "I did the same thing. I made my boy give me the beastly thing, but I had to give it him back again."

"But I threw mine away." They laughed together. "What fools we both must have looked to the young wretches! Count Zarano warned me, but I wouldn't take his advice."

Miss Hudson had looked very shocked when Christine appeared seated in front of the Count, but she accepted the situation in the proper spirit when she heard Christine's confession.

Soon the mule carried them far past their companions. Christine turned a laughing face to her lover.

"You are happy again, sweetheart?" he said as his lips met hers.

"More than happy, dearest. I was a fool and I apologise."

"I didn't think it was the right time or place for the lesson you wanted me to give the boy. I hated displeasing you—I suffered as much as you did. You believe that, don't you?"

"Yes . . . but I longed to thrash the hateful little beast! You . . . well, you didn't!" she said mischievously.

"He isn't hateful really. He would probably show more sympathy and charity to a starving man or woman than any English schoolboy. And remember that in Sicily and Italy there is no need for a society to protect children from cruelty. That boy understands hunger and starvation, so he has pity for the wretched and unfed, but he does not believe that animals suffer."

And so it came to pass that Christine's visit to the sulphur mines made her admire her lover for his justice and impartiality, just as his kindness to the suffering kid made her feel certain that her first impression of his character was wrong.

CHAPTER XVI

That same night in her aunt's bedroom Christine told Mrs. Bullock that Count Zarano had asked her to marry him and that she loved him. She had given her promise in the hope that her aunt would gladly give her consent.

Her aunt's ivory-backed brush fell to the floor. A jealous rage convulsed her; she could not make her lips speak. Christine watched the heavy flesh on her cheeks grow hideously pale.

"You like him, Auntie—say you approve."

"Approve! Approve! No, I certainly do not approve. You are a sly minx, Christine." Mrs. Bullock's voice was high-pitched.

Christine tried to put her arms round her. Mrs. Bullock shook her off.

"Yes, a sly deceitful minx! You pretended you disliked the Count! Before me you rejected any politeness he showed you. And all the time it was a pose!"

"I did dislike him at first—at least, I was a little afraid of him . . . he made me nervous . . . he does still sometimes, but it's rather a nice feeling."

Mrs. Bullock stared at her niece. Christine was standing in front of her in a thin pink kimono; it fell open in front and revealed a soft nightgown of white crepe-de-chine, which clung to her young figure. Her glittering hair was about her shoulders. Her aunt was conscious of the subtle fragrance of young flesh; even to her unimaginative mind the girl looked like a flower, a spring flower culled from a moist English orchard.

"You don't know your own mind! You are just a weathercock! This nonsense is only because the Count is the first man who has seriously made love to you. Count Zarano is a thorough man of the world; he should marry a woman of the world, not a schoolgirl like you."

"Girls of nineteen are not children nowadays. I shall be twenty soon; I am quite a woman." In spite of her words Christine only looked like a slim schoolgirl. Most people would have agreed with her aunt that she was "owr young" to marry yet.

"You a woman, Christine? Count Zarano knows you are only a child; perhaps he is tired of women."

"Oh, auntie!" Christine had time to say no more.

Her aunt had controlled her violent temper as long as she could; she now gave it full rein. The girl's expression maddened her.

"Silly little fool!" she said. "What do you know about him? What has he got to keep you on? A fine penny you'll cost him, with your ignorance of money and love of all fine things! I don't suppose you have any idea of the cost of that nightgown! What do you know about his people or his past, I ask you?"

"Nothing, Auntie—nothing except what love tells a woman."

"Love? Fiddlesticks! You don't know what love means. Anyone can tell that by the way you sing! No singing-master can teach passion—and you haven't got any. The man has just played on your vanity. I didn't think you could have been such a fool, Christine, I honestly didn't."

Christine's cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes looked black.

"But you liked him, you encouraged him, you enjoyed his music and bridge and company generally!"

"Of course I did, but I didn't imagine I'd a fool for a niece! Where has your Scots sense gone to?"

Christine sighed. "What can I do, Auntie? I hate displeasing you."

"Do? Leave Girgenti to-morrow, of course, that's what you'll do. Tell your fine foreigner that you must give him up, that you didn't mean it."

"That I never will!"

Her aunt came nearer to her and looked into her flaming eyes; they were like polished agates.

"You never will, won't you, Miss? Then tell him from me that you are dowerless, for not one penny of mine shall go to support an idle husband."

Christine's knowledge that her aunt had lost all control of her temper helped her to keep her own.

"Can't you remember what it was like to be loved?" she said. "To have a lover makes all the world wonderful! You must know that a woman never really lives until she loves?" Christine imagined that she was speaking because she felt these things.

"I am not in my dotage yet, Christine!" Mrs. Bullock's voice was cruel, her eyes vindictive; she could have hit Christine for her words.

"I never meant that, Auntie. Do forgive me and do please give me your consent. It would make life just perfect."

"I'll do nothing of the kind! I enjoyed your good-looking foreigner's music and society, but if he thinks you are going to be my heiress, he is greatly mistaken. I will never consent to such a marriage."

"He never thought of such a thing."

"Oh, didn't he?" Mrs. Bullock imitated her niece's voice of incredulity. "Didn't he just! If he knew that you were penniless and had thought that I should be fool enough, he would probably have proposed to the aunt and not to the niece. You have played a clever, deceitful game, Christine, but I can play another. I hold the trump card in my hand."

Christine was an extraordinarily sweet-tempered girl, but her aunt's vulgar methods of showing her disapproval of her engagement roused her worst spirit. She could be very stubborn; there was a pigheaded Scots determination in her gentle disposition.

"I have done nothing deceitful," she said coldly. "People do not generally make love in public, nor do men make girls remarkable by showing their intentions to the world at large. As soon as he asked me to marry him, I came to tell you. Why did you not tell me that you did not really like him? It is you who were deceitful."

Christine's anger quieted her aunt, who had seldom seen the girl in that cold determined attitude.

"Don't be rude, Christine! I found him amusing. He is always polite, he has charming manners with strangers. But just you wait! If you are foolish enough to marry him, you will see how quickly those good manners will change. Wait until the glamour of his passion has worn off, wait until his quick brain finds you a bore! You'll see who's right then."

"These are the prejudices people had when communication with other countries was so restricted that we knew nothing about any European peoples, when every 'foreigner,' as you call Count Zarano, was a villain, and only British people possessed any moral qualities."

"I trust no foreigners. They amuse me, their music is generally better than ours; but I wouldn't trust any man or woman east of the Rhine, and very few Frenchmen at that."

"Andrea's ways are our ways. He has neither foreign accents nor habits; he loves English people."

"It's no use arguing, Christine. And you are talking nonsense. Not a foreigner! No Anglo-Saxon kisses a lady's hand when he bids her good-night or good-bye. I brought you to Sicily and I am responsible for you while you are here. I will take you back to London—men are so tiresome in this country."

"What do you expect me to do in England?"

"What you used to do, of course! Don't be silly!"

"I cannot now go on living with you."

"You won't live with me? Why not, pray?"

"Because you disapprove of my lover and I mean to marry him just as soon as ever I can."

"Well, upon my word, I should like to shake you. A chit of a thing like you talking to me like that! Go to your bed and wake up with more sense and manners! Not live with me, indeed!"

"Before I go let me tell you this: I am entirely free; you have no legal right to control my doings and I mean to marry whom I choose. Good-night."

Christine turned her back on her aunt and walked away quickly. Mrs. Bullock looked at the indignant girl as if she had never seen her before. The tomboy had turned into an angry, defiant woman, a woman whose will she recognized for the first time.

Christine reached her room with flaming cheeks and a panting heart. She went straight to the big open window. She had hated talking to her aunt in such a fashion, for she had been kind to her after a manner, and Christine had been brought up to reverence and obey people who were older than herself.

The night was beautiful, its stillness profound, the mystery of sleeping Sicily surrounded the hotel. The scent from the garden, which was illuminated by a million stars, was wafted past her as she stood, framed by the window, gazing into the heavens.

"Oh, moon and stars!" she said. "I have just been given eyes! You are a thousand times more wonderful than you ever were before! Oh, flowers, your scent is ten times sweeter!" She stepped out on to the balcony to give herself more completely to the sensuous silence. She had learnt the joy of surrender. Sicily enfolded her in a lover's embrace. After her aunt's vulgar scolding its tenderness quieted her nerves.

"I cannot and will not go back to London," she said. "I just won't go back and dress up and undress four times a day for all the London seasons in the world! One season of it was more than enough for a lifetime!"

Her thoughts travelled from London to the future. Her aunt was soon forgotten. Her home was to be in Athens, in Egypt, and in the desert of Southern Tunisia. She drew in her breath. Footsteps were coming near her balcony. She listened. They had drawn nearer.

It was Andrea. She could see him; he was carrying some white roses.

He stopped under her balcony. She peeped eagerly through the iron bars of its floor; she could see him. He was laying the roses on the ground beneath her balcony, Sicilian roses with large loose petals.

Christine sighed. Love was so wonderful. It was exhausting her.

The Count walked slowly away. It was the second time that Christine, unobserved, had watched him perform an act which was to affect the whole current of her life. He was her devout lover. Her aunt's words were blown from her mind like chaff before the wind.

PART II

CHAPTER XVII

TEN YEARS LATER

In the island of Ischia, which lies within a short distance of Naples and Capri, a cloud-burst had wiped out a village which lay in one of the ravines on a volcanic mountain. Isola d'Ischia is almost all mountains, with blue and white and pink villages clinging like limpets to their sea-washed cliffs or climbing their precipitous heights.

The morning after the storm the Island lay sparkling like a jewel in the sea; the sky was cloudless, the air was clean and invigorating. There was nothing to suggest the tragedy of the night before. The storm had burst after nightfall, that sudden nightfall of the South, which had ended an ominous and depressing day.

The inhabitants of Casamicciola, one of the largest towns in the Island, were watching a small steamer plying across the water and heading directly for their port, which forms the lower portion of the town. It was not the customary hour for the arrival of the boat from Naples; but it was bringing food and comforts for the homeless and a very important visitor to the scene of the tragedy. The village which had been washed down the mountain side as if it had been built of cards, lay right above the higher town of Casamicciola.

It was absurd to think that comforts and aid were needed for anyone living on the island, which must have looked to the people on the steamer like an earthly Eden. Golden nespoli, juicy and ripe, showed above whitewashed walls which protected orange orchards and chestnut groves. From the boat they must have seen oleander arbours offering delicious shelter from the sun and smelt the scent of a hundred blossoms which love Southern soil and fierce sunlight.

One man on the white steamer was straining his eyes to get the first glimpse of these familiar scenes. He had not visited the island since he was a lad, but he remembered every feature of it. The strong Saracen towers built to guard the coast from the sudden attacks of the daring Corsairs; the mosque-shaped churches, with their cupolas of bright tiles; the flat-roofed houses, the round loggias and outside stairs; the fishing villages, pink and blue and white, which sheltered under the cliffs—all these things were dearly familiar to his eyes.

When the boat put into the pier, there was a rush to the gangway. Everyone wished to be the first to see the famous Cavaliere, the "millionario," the benefactor of the island. When they caught sight of him and met the bright smile with which he received their welcome, a cry went up. Every man, woman and child shouted: "Viva Salvatore Mazzini! Viva il Cavaliere! Welcome to Ischia!"

The three black-coated and black-gloved citizens in attendance followed him closely; they were jealous of their official privilege and not a little impatient at the delay on the pier caused by the people.

Salvatore Mazzini loved every smile and expression of sympathy which he received; he would much rather have walked with the people up the steep path to the high town. But it had been arranged by the municipality that he was to be driven from the port up to the town, no distance at all, so he willingly complied. To be seated in an old cab behind a tired horse, is always considered a more dignified mode of travelling in Italy than walking. Every step of the way was full of meaning for him. His quick eyes saw the smallest details with the rapidity of a searchlight. His loquacious companions did not know that he was nearing his grandmother's cottage, the cottage which he had lived in as a little child, that his whole interest for the time being was centred on it.

When they reached it he saw a woman standing on the doorstep. The sun was blinding her eyes, so she was screening them with her two hands. Her personality—or magnetism, or who can say what?—made Salvatore Mazzini look at her intently, rather than at his grandmother's house.

As the horse stopped, at his request, the woman dropped her hands, her arms fell to her sides and for one moment Salvatore Mazzini, Ischia's illustrious visitor, gazed straight into the eyes of Christine Lovat—now Christine Zarano.

It was only for a moment, for the horse went on again at a brave pace, but it was long enough to disturb the millionaire's mind and completely drive out of it the answers which he ought to have given to the black-coated individuals at his side. Fleeting, indefinite, and wholly unsatisfactory thoughts and conjectures leaped through his mind.

If the woman's eyes were curiously like the eyes of La Primavera, if her hair was the same as the hair of the girl who had come into his cottage like the breath of Spring and had captured his heart for all time, they must belong to someone who by strange chance happened to be La Primavera's double. The girl whom he had worshipped was a woman now and a Contessa—not a cottager of Ischia.

The horse, urged on by the driver, beat, beat, beat its iron shoes against the unyielding stones. The three figures in black told the dreaming Cavaliere some more particulars about the disaster of the previous night. They also described to him the improvements which had been made through his generosity to the sulphur baths.

With an effort the Cavaliere brought his wandering mind back to the object of his visit to the island. He gave himself up to the wishes of the people. He had come to visit his mother's early home and to do what he could to alleviate the suffering of the homeless, so it mattered very little to him what he did with his time. If it pleased the simple people to make a fuss about him, he supposed he must endure it. Millionaires did not visit Ischia every day.

. . . .

A few hours later he was conducted to the scene of the tragedy. He had of course seen many devastations caused by Nature, but none so intimate or pathetic as the ruin of this little hamlet, which lay in all its nakedness asking for succour. Not one stone was left standing upon another—it is true that there were few houses built of stone—no saint's shrine, by Divine care, had been saved; no altar to the God Whose ways are inscrutable was left unwrecked. Sodom and Gomorrah had not been more completely ruined.

And what was their offence?—these humble toilers in the mountain vineyards who worked so hard and were contented with so little.

There were still visible portions of broken tables and chairs, and twisted iron bedsteads, under the lathe and plaster and cheap building materials of the devastated homes. Burst straw mattresses ruined by water, fine copper pots and pans bruised and beaten beyond any possible use, lay with mocking intimacy under the glorious blue of a southern sky.

Salvatore Mazzini knew the daily lives of these patient peasants, whose homes had been so ruthlessly destroyed. He knew their thrift and industry, their childish enjoyment of the humblest festivities. And as he went over the ruins of their village he asked himself again and again, Why had they been so cruelly punished?

At one spot where the wreck of property seemed more complete than in any other, he came upon the woman whom he had seen standing at the door of his grandmother's cottage. There was no mistaking the tall slim figure, or the golden hair. She was with an elderly woman, they were obviously searching for some small treasure. The water in the stream which had done so much damage had subsided; there was now only a little running down the centre of the narrow channel.

Cavaliere Mazzini asked his companions if they knew the name of the fair-haired woman. When he had found out all that they could tell him about her, he pointed to her and said:

"Let us go and see what they are looking for."

When they arrived at the spot he was too shy to address Christine. What his companions had told him had set his senses dancing; the years seemed to have rolled back.

"Si, Signore, I have lost all," the woman said in answer to his question.

"But what is the particular object you are trying to find? I should like to help you."

"No, no, Signore, not you!"

"Ma! Signora, why not? I am strong, I have worked hard, I can work again. Tell me what am I to look for?"

"No, no, Signore!" The woman looked distressed. "The illustrissimo Cavaliere must not dirty his hands. Ma grazie, Signore, grazie."

The Cavaliere laughed. "Must not dirty my hands indeed! Donna mia, as a youth I spent all my days digging amongst ruins and discovering buried treasures."

"Truly, Signore?" The woman smiled. Her dark eyes looked at his searchingly; they appraised the value of almost every article of clothing he wore. "You worked with your hands when you were young?"

"Veramente, Signora." He turned as he spoke to the 'foreigner,' as his black-coated informants had called Christine. She too was dressed in black and her clothing would have cost no more than the peasant-woman's with whom she was working. "You may perhaps recall that fact, Signora," he said, "if you can remember long ago coming to a little house in Girgenti and asking a young man if he could sell you a Venus?"

Before he had finished speaking Christine's two hands went out to him.

"Ah, I thought so! I hoped so!" she said. "You are the same Salvatore Mazzini—I was almost certain you were, and yet I could scarcely believe my eyes."

"La Primavera," he said gravely, "the same Primavera after all these years!" In the old days—what would he not have given to touch the hands he now held so firmly in his own? The years rolled back and Salvatore saw her, the ideal of his dreams and hopes, all robed again in the glamour of youth.

Embarrassment hurried Christine into speech. "This poor woman has lost her most valued treasure," she said nervously. "I was helping her to look for it." Her words, intentionally or otherwise, destroyed the intimacy of silence.

"What has she lost? Can we replace it? I want to help in every possible way."

Christine shook her head.

"One of those unbuyable treasures which show us the poverty of wealth?" he said. He turned to the woman and pointed to the ruins. "Let us look for it, Signora, but first tell me what it is."

"A picture of my son, Signore, and the image of the Madonna of Pompeii. When the sacred image was brought to the island many years ago, I took my son to the shrine;

he was cured instantly of the affliction which was killing him. When he grew to be a man he gave me a beautiful image of the Blessed Madonna; I have treasured it ever since. My son is in South America, Signore; he will never come back if I fail to find the blessed image." Tears poured down the woman's face; she threw up her arms to the blue heavens.

"Don't despair, Signora, or forget the goodness of St. Anthony. Have you asked his help?"

"Santo Dio! But I have behaved like a heathen—I have indeed forgotten the blessed martyrs." A rosary made from polished carob seeds slipped through her fingers as she petitioned the blessed St. Anthony to help her. While she was praying Salvatore turned eagerly to Christine.

Words failed him. They stood looking at each other in an embarrassed silence while a thousand and one questions passed through their minds. At last Christine made a commonplace remark; she remembered Zita.

"How is your sister, Cavaliere Mazzini? I remember her so well."

"Zita is very well, thank you, and very busy. The years have dealt kindly with her, Contessa."

"She is married?"

Salvatore shook his head. "She is still my faithful 'donna di servizio'; we live together just as of old."

Surprise brightened Christine's face. "But you, Cavaliere . . . you . . . have you . . . do you mean, you have not married?"

Salvatore threw back his head in the old classic way. "No, Contessa," he said, "I have found too much to do to get married. My business has been my wife and I have found her a most exacting one."

"But you were an antiquarian and an artist."

"Ah, Contessa . . ."

Christine held up her hand. "Please not 'Contessa'—I have renounced that."

The man smiled. Then seeing the gravity of the delicate face, which had more real beauty in its pathos than ever it had in its youthful gaiety, his expression changed. "You have renounced the title, Signora?"

"Life has completely changed our positions, Cavaliere. You were poor and hardworking while I was idle and rich. . . ." She paused. "Or rather, my aunt was." She cast her eyes round the tragic scene. "To-day you come to this scene of tragedy as a saviour and benefactor; you are rich and important. I am a worker and a very poor woman." She looked away from him as she added, "I believe I'm indebted to you for all the money I earn."

"Signora . . . ?"

"I am one of the trained masseuses at the baths. I am known here as Nurse Smith—or Smitt, as the people pronounce it."

She looked up. Their eyes met. His were full of admiration and tenderness. To a remarkable extent the old Christine, La Primavera, was standing before him, speaking to him as she had spoken when she had almost demanded him to sell her a Venus. Time had but added a womanly charm to the girl who had lived in his thoughts like a bright flame for ten years.

There was no time for more conversation for the three black coats, which at his request had left him to examine the ruins by himself, had returned. They monopolised him.

After a voluble discussion it was decided that he should return with them to the town, where a deputation was waiting to present him with an address.

"I wish to speak to that poor woman who is looking for a precious image. I will come with you in five minutes."

As he turned to speak to the woman he saw Christine holding up something in her hands. As she did so, she called out:

"Ecco Signora, e trovato."

She was kneeling amongst the debris, close to the edge of the stream.

Again Salvatore heard her call out, "Signora Coppa, I've found it! It's quite whole—look!" She held up a small ironbound box; it had been lodged against a scaldino, which was half buried in the mud of the river. The image was still inside it.

"Brava! Brava!" the woman said, as she threw up her eyes to the heavens. "Grazie a Dio! Grazie a Dio!"

When Salvatore put some francs into her hand, he said: "Our good friend St. Anthony does not like to be forgotten, Signora. He was only waiting."

The woman clasped the image to her breast. "Even with no home, and nothing to call my own, I have much to be thankful for. Your heart is all for the poor, Signore. It is uncuore d'oro."

Salvatore smilled. The woman was in deadly earnest. "Addio, Signora Coppa," he said, "you shall have a home again and plenty to call your own very soon. The world is full of kind hearts."

The woman's flow of gratitude was so unending that he had to leave her before she had half finished her eloquent expressions of relief and thanksgiving.

To Christine he said formally: "I was once deprived of a great privilege; to make up for that disappointment, which at the time was a very great one, may I have the pleasure of calling upon you before I leave the island?"

Christine laughed—it was her old ringing laugh. "Of course you may. But please remember that you are Ischia's distinguished visitor; everything you do is of importance. You are now 'the millionaire Mazzini'; your old friend Christine Lovat is a working woman."

"La Primavera—that is what I called you." He smiled, as though he were visualising the past.

"Zita told me you called me that. Well, I am autumn now." She tried to laugh lightly.

He shook his head. "To Zita and myself you are sempre Primavera, sempre sorridente, sempre allegra, sempre rosea."

"That was ten years ago, Cavaliere Mazzini. Since you gave me my first lesson in Greek art much water has flowed under the bridge."

"Much has happened in ten years, Signora." His eyes rejected the insinuation that she had changed. "But I must say good-bye. May I call on you? Permit me, Signora."

"If you can spare the time, I shall be delighted." She held out her hand. In the old days she would not have offered him her hand—the thought passed through her mind as he held it. "In the midst of all this tragedy," she said shyly, "meeting you has been a great pleasure and surprise. My life is very uneventful."

The next moment she found herself standing alone amongst the ruins, smiling and recalling happy thoughts of her girlish admiration for him and her interest in his work. Certainly wealth had not vulgarised him, as wealth vulgarises so many self-made Italians. He had now the simplicity and dignity of a great man.

CHAPTER XVIII

That same evening after sundown Christine heard a knock at her door. Her eyes brightened as she rose to answer it.

"So you have come?" she said gaily. "This is indeed an honour! How nice of you!"

"Please, Signora, don't say that."

"But it is nice of the popular idol of the hour to find time to come to my quiet little home. Do come in."

"May I?" In the same breath he said, "Oh, how charming!"

Christine's cottage was indeed charming in its humble way. Wild flowers in copper water-jars gave it a fresh and homely air, and the few pieces of furniture had been well and carefully chosen. Nothing in it had cost her more than a few lire, but the things had once belonged to people of refinement. There was somehow an English air about the room which Salvatore felt at once.

As he said, "How charming!" Christine smiled happily. "I'm glad you like it," she said. "It is very easy to make a small house look pretty in this climate and in a country where old furniture costs so absurdly little."

"Yet how few such homes do we see!"

"If you have any time to spare for a talk, Cavaliere, do sit down."

"The evening is my own," he said. "I have got through all my duties."

They were speaking in English, a fact which Christine had not noticed, for Salvatore had addressed her in English from the first. He spoke it now as well as she did herself.

"It has been a terrible disaster. Your coming has delighted the people."

"Poor things! They were so brave and philosophical! How typically Italian the whole thing has been! Do you know, until I came here I had not realised how different my life has become."

Christine's eyes answered his. They said to her, "Picture my old life—contrast the me of to-day with the me of ten years ago." She had been doing so ever since he had spoken to her in the morning, amidst the ruins of the devastated village.

"They will build another village in the same place?" she said. "That is what is so surprising. You know, I suppose, that the whole of Casamicciola was destroyed in 1881 and again in 1883? More than a thousand lives were lost."

"Yes, I know. The last was a hideous disaster." He sighed, and then said musingly, "It is a tragic little island. It seems to me that there may be some truth in the legend that the Giant Typhoeus lies buried under these mountains, just as Encaeladus lies under Mount Etna. Periodically he heaves up his mighty shoulders, and that is the result."

"Can't he be 'laid' as we 'lay' our ghosts in Scotland?" Christine smiled.

Salvatore threw back his head. "Perhaps, if you propitiate Jupiter—he it was who imprisoned him."

"You know the Island well?" Christine said. "Didn't your mother live here?"

"Yes, she lived at Lacco. But how wonderful of you to have remembered! This was my grandmother's cottage, when she was a widow; I stayed here as a little boy."

"How extraordinary! In this very cottage?" A wave of colour dyed Christine's cheek. Why had she thought it extraordinary.

"Yes. That is why I made the cab stop at the door for a moment this morning; I was looking at the house and then I saw you."

Their eyes met nervously. "And you knew me?" Christine spoke softly.

"I saw someone whom I knew must be your double if it were not you." He hesitated before he said, "I don't suppose you recognized me? Of course you wouldn't. The old Girgenti days did not mean to you all that they weant to me. My life at that time was so uneventful."

"Oh, but I remember everything about those old days. This afternoon after you had left me everything that happened at Girgenti passed before my eyes in the sunlight, just like film-pictures."

Her eyes dropped; she looked confused. The memory of the urns brought a trace of stiffness into her manner; her husband had told her about Salvatore's act of dishonesty. After she knew it she had never desired to visit his cottage again.

"I remember one thing that you will have forgotten—you promised to come to the museum if your aunt would let you . . ." he paused. "Well, you never came."

She looked up; his eyes banished her suspicion. She was sure now that the story about the urns had been one of her husband's many lies. "I remember quite well. I had to go to church with my aunt. How cross I was! It wasn't my fault."

"Is she alive?" he asked.

Christine shook her head. "I don't know. I am dead, to her, at any rate."

"Ah, Signora!"

"I married against her wishes."

"The Conte Zarano?"

"Yes, 'il Signore,' as Zita used to call him." Her voice suggested shame and suffering; she shrank from the memory of her folly.

"Gia, gia." Salvatore lost himself in thought.

"That is why I live here quite cut off from my old life. I couldn't live like this in England; Italy is the only country where poverty means refinement; in most places it is degrading and unlovely."

Salvatore's eyes spoke to her. His words meant little at the moment. The mere mention of her marriage had built up a wall between them.

"Poverty means simplicity in this wonderful climate. But generally speaking, it is nonsense to talk about 'the refining influence of poverty.' In most countries, if it has not a degrading effect, it has a narrowing effect intellectually, except in very rare cases. Genteel poverty such as you get in England is mere wretchedness."

"The mind becomes a thrift machine." Christine managed to laugh; the situation was saved, her husband forgotten. "Here in the South the sunshine makes everyone rich in a measure. Poor as I am, I live with beauty all day long; I wear simple clothes and look at glorious flowers and views. In London I used to wear beautiful clothes and look at ugly, smoke-begrimed houses."

"You always loved beautiful things," he said. "Do you remember how disappointed you were because I couldn't sell you a terracotta Venus?"

Christine's old laugh echoed through the cottage. "Fancy you recollecting that! Wasn't I a silly tourist?"

She rose from her chair and went quickly into an inner room. When she came back she laid something on the table near her visitor's chair. "Look—do you remember that?"

The Cavaliere turned his chair round so that he could see what she referred to.

"Ah, Signora, the little casket! You have kept it!"

"Yes, I have kept it and used it ever since. It holds all my little baubles."

"All these years?" His eyes caressed her.

"Yes, it has gone with me through good and evil fortune; it has known all my joys and sorrows."

"Primavera!" The word was scarcely audible, but Christine heard it. "Did you ever guess that that little casket was the cause of a lie?" he smiled tenderly. "Would you like to know?"

Christine became anxious. Was he going to tell her about the urns? Was Andrea's story true? Had the casket also been stolen?

"My sister told the lie, Signora. Yes, you can afford to smile. There is no need for your grave expression—it was not a very big one."

"She told a lie about this?" Christine held up the casket.

"Yes. Zita wished me to see you again; she was afraid I never should if you got the casket, so she deliberately said what was not true; she pretended the casket was not in the high cupboard." He smiled. "Ah, Signora, I remember it all so well—life held so few great pleasures in those days. Do you remember that you had to wait for the casket?"

"Yes, it all comes back to me. I took Zita to a cake-shop—ah, and that reminds me she had a secret! She met a young farmer there; you did not know anything about it. And she has not married him?"

Salvatore's face darkened. "My sister's girlish romance was ruined. She was romantic; she is still romantic . . ." he paused. "It is strange how clearly all these things stand out. Nothing has mattered so much since.

But I must not be ungracious, Signora. We are happy, and mortals must not expect everything in life. Fortune has indeed smiled on my enterprise." He laughed, but not mirthfully. "You would find Zita greatly changed, but she has still her simple nature. To me, she is quite wonderful."

"She was exquisite as I remember her. I hope she has not changed too much."

"Three years in a convent school in America have made her . . ." he paused ". . . shall I say a lady,' Signora?"

"There is no need. Zita was always one; in her peasant's dress she was a lady." Christine held out her skirt. "I wear a peasant's dress now; I hope it has not made me any less . . . well, 'ladylike.' "

"You are laughing at me, Signora, but you know what I mean. Zita in the old days did not aspire to being anything more than a well-brought-up peasant girl. When I became well enough off to afford the expense I sent her to a good school. She has worked hard and she has benefited by the advantages which wealth threw in her way."

"Then you live in America?"

"My business is there; we are citizens of the world." Their eyes met. "I was once a dilettante, Signora; I had dreams of marvellous things. So had my father. Then Fate threw into my hands a wonderful secret, which had been waiting and waiting for a discoverer."

"Yes," Christine said. "Was it the iridescent glaze you spent much time and study upon? I remember you hoped you might be able to revive one of the great earthenware industries, such as Caltagirone or Gubbio. I have heard your name connected with Sicilian pottery."

"Pottery is now only my hobby, Signora, the hobby of a wealthy man. It could never in these days make a man's fortune."

"But you still work at it?"

"I have a kiln and a small bottega at Licata. Last year some very fine work was done. At the Paris Exhibition one of our plates won the Gold Medal."

"Have you a bottega in America?"

He threw back his head. "America! Signora, America is the land of machine-made labour, a land of labour-saving ingenuity. The artisan in America does not understand the pleasure our men take in hand-made work, in the production of objects of beauty which can only be made by patient hand-labour. To American workmen factory-made plates and vases are more beautiful than the hand-made objects, baked in our small kilns."

"Fatto à mano!" Christine said. "How familiar those words become in Italy." Their eyes met in sympathy.

"There is sadly little that is hand-made in America, Signora. The genius of the inventor seems to expend itself on machines to save hand-labour. They kill artistic feeling." He smiled his peculiarly gentle smile. "There is something extraordinarily mechanical and hard about life lived under such circumstances; one misses the beautiful service of those who stand and wait. The poor do not even cultivate their gardens because it entails a certain amount of hand-labour."

"Under such conditions life soon loses its repose and simplicity," Christine said. "Here in Ischia, where wealth is unknown, labour never means toil."

"In New York I can do nearly everything except put myself to bed by turning cranks or touching buttons. Here I have smiling faces and willing hands in place of electric buttons, caro paese."

"In Ischia all those inventions would be out of working order in a week's time." Christine laughed.

"My dear, happy-go-lucky, unmethodical country!" he said. "Thank God the people are not yet too proud to be called servants."

"Italy is beautifully unsnobbish," Christine said. "You only get snobbishness with what we call 'new money'—people returned from America."

"Ah, Signora!" the millionaire laughed. "I am sure that was not meant personally; yet perhaps the cap fits. We do not know ourselves; it is impossible to feel vulgar."

"Of course it wasn't personal, and you know as well as I do the sort of Italians and Sicilians I mean. America generally spoils them. But you never told me what your 'new money' comes from."

Salvatore took up the jewel-casket. "While I was working away with glazes and cements and idling my time over Attic red-figured vases—by the way," he said absently, "did you know that Ischia served the potters of Cumae?"

Christine shook her head; her eyes expressed the interest he had aroused.

"Cumae was the oldest of the Greek colonies on the mainland, I think. Its Greek civilisation dates back to about 1500 B.C. But Livy asserts that Ischia, not Cumae, was the settlers' first landing-place—Pithecusa, as it was called. After a time, for more practical trading purposes they went to the mainland and Cumae became the new colony. But they still got the clay for their famous pottery from the island."

Christine's eyes smiled tenderly. The millionaire was the ardent Salvatore of ten years ago; he had completely forgotten his 'new money' in his visualising of the early Greek settlers in Ischia. She was interested in all that he told her, but her more human interest clung to the hope that he would not forget to tell her how he had acquired his wealth. Was his 'new money' clean? Could he show her that the story of the stolen urns was not true, that his wealth did not even owe its foundation to dishonesty? She hoped so.

"You have left the story of your own invention again," she said laughingly. "Please go back to it—I was so interested."

"But it is not interesting, Signora, only very commonplace. I struck oil when I was looking for something else; wealth came to me through a very practical discovery—

nothing nearly so fascinating as Greek vase-painting or Caltagirone pottery." He sighed, as though his life had once been picturesque; now it was merely luxurious. "Bene, Signora"—he spoke in Italian; much of his mother tongue had slipped into their conversation—"you know I was also interested in cement; the old Roman kind had a great attraction for me. It was while I was trying to rediscover the old indestructible article that I discovered another even more valuable one—I hit upon a thing for which the world has been waiting, Signora, for many, many years."

Christine was listening sympathetically.

"I stumbled across the secret of how to make paint which will withstand water. I suppose you know that up to a few years ago, no paint had been discovered which could resist the action of water? Ships and bridges had to be painted incessantly. Do you know that in your own country a hundred men were continually painting the Forth Bridge? Think of the labour that meant! They painted it unceasingly. A water-resisting paint which would save all that labour and cost was waiting to be discovered."

"How clever of you to have invented it!"

"It was chance, mere chance, Signora. These useful discoveries are generally made while the discoverers are striving after something quite different. I very much doubt if Lord Kelvin ever devoted his great genius to the common household tap, yet they say it made his fortune." Salvatore's eyes were travelling into the distance.

"And then what happened?" Christine's face was alight with interest. She did not mean to lose any of the story; she questioned him as she had questioned the youth who told her how the red-figured Attic vases were painted, ten years ago.

"I was working at the time for an American; the cement which I had discovered was useful to him, although it was not equal to the Roman article. He financed the making of it; I drew a small percentage and earned a fine salary. When I hit upon the waterproof paint I had enough money to keep the concern in my own hands; but he was extremely kind to me." Salvatore looked up. "Now, Signora, you know the foundation of my wealth; it is a purely practical one, not at all romantic—waterproof paint, very 'new money.' When I was young," he said quietly, "I never imagined such wealth."

Christine felt relieved, foolishly so. "And you have made it in America, not in Italy?"

"Yes, in America. But all my workmen are Italians. The economic position of my own country does not allow a poor man to succeed in any commercial enterprise."

Christine's eyes questioned him; had he become any less ardently patriotic?

"In Italy business undertakings are taxed so outrageously that they cannot possibly pay; sooner or later they have to close down. That is why our Italian industries are almost negative; only the vast wealth of American or German capitalists can hold out, and then," he added emphatically, "only if the business is an exceptionally paying one."

"Yours was?"

"It could never have flourished in Italy."

"Then you have become an American citizen?"

"Non mai, Signora." He spoke emphatically and threw back his head.

"But why?"

"Because I am an Italian and a Mazzini."

Christine laughed. "But America has behaved better to you than Italy; you owe something to her."

"Signora, Sicily is my country; I am an Italian."

"Certainly I should not like to change."

"Italians do not forget. They leave their mother only to return to her with means to help her. Germans become Americans, Slavs become Americans, almost every immigrant becomes an American, the Italian never. Our country and our families are sacred."

Christine leant forward and put her hand on the little jewel-casket which he was delicately fingering. Her eyes looked into his; they were beautiful but very serious.

"I am so glad you have told me all this, so very glad, amico mio. I wish I had known it sooner."

"Si, Signora." He saw that she could have said more. "Tell me," he spoke abstractedly.

"Someone once told me something about you which I know now was not true. It touched your honour. When you left me this morning I began to wonder if . . ." she paused, ". . . well, how can I say it?" Her eyes smiled, her voice was apologetic. ". . . If your dollars were clean? To-day I never doubted the fact until I found myself alone, until the old days lived again, and I remembered how sad I was when I was told that my first impression of you was incorrect."

"And it was, Signora . . .?"

"That you were the soul of honour, that you resisted the most unusual temptations. I was very young and impressionable at that time and your life seemed to me very beautiful and almost ideal. Mine was very conventional and uninteresting; my visit to you gave me immense pleasure."

"And then, Signora?" the Cavaliere's voice shook. "And then?"

"And then I did not come any more. I did not wish to come. My Sicilian idyll was spoilt; neither of you were what I thought you were, or so I was told."

"My sister too—little Zita?" Cavaliere Mazzini rose from his chair. His face was ashen. Christine was astonished at the intensity of feeling which her words had aroused. "Was she slandered too? Did she suffer?"

"Please, Cavaliere, don't think anything more about it. Of course it wasn't true, but I didn't know then all that I know now." She paused. "I ought not to have told you; I ought to have known that it, like everything else, was untrue, was false, was hideous."

"Signora . . .?"

Salvatore's one word held a thousand meanings. Christine laid her fingers lightly on his arm; she did it to mitigate the pain her words had caused him. He let his eyes rest on the slender, well-remembered hands.

"Life has hurt you, Primavera—it has been cruel?"

"No, Cavaliere, life has not been cruel; it was I who was foolish. Life is just what we make, what we bring to it. I made mine hideous for five years; I let misery trample on me. Then I got my back against the wall, I determined to fight; I wasn't going to lie down under it." She laughed unmirthfully. "I had health and youth, and now I have many kind friends, and a great capacity for forgetfulness. Forgetfulnes is God's healing."

"Signora! Signora!" The Cavaliere's voice was broken. "Do you know the inheritance of a Mazzini, the characteristic of my great ancestor? An inability to forget, to be faithless to an ideal."

Christine became nervous under his eyes; the thoughts in his mind were driven into hers.

"Don't be sorry for me, Cavaliere. I have long ago ceased to be sorry for myself. We can enjoy life in so many different ways, when we have got over the folly of expecting Heaven on earth. Happiness may perhaps come to us if we could give up searching for it and expecting it."

"Ah, Signora, Signora!" He repeated the words tenderly. She still looked too fair and young to have discovered such wisdom.

"Is it not true, amico mio? I am not speaking bitterly; I find life very delightful in this exquisite island."

He grasped her hands.

"You have called me your friend, let me prove myself worthy of that honour."

"I would not have spoken to you as I have done if I had not felt a very strong tie of friendship. Isn't it true that when we are young we cry for the moon; when we get it we find it is made of green cheese? It is not the fault of the moon; it has always been made of green cheese, only we didn't know it."

"To-night's moon has yet to come, Signora; to-day has been made up of miracles. On my arrival here I was looking for my grandmother's cottage; I found you! When I was giving all my attention to the disaster, and it was not easy, I found you again amongst the ruins." He lapsed into silence, while his mind was visualising the events of the last ten years.

Christine again shared his thoughts. Without one word being spoken she felt that during all the years which had passed his memory of her had meant a great deal to him. What he had said about the inheritance of a Mazzini had held a double significance. At last she spoke, for the sympathetic silence into which they had slipped had to be broken.

"How strangely the wheel turns! Ischia conveyed nothing to me years ago when you told me you had lived here in your boyhood, and now I am actually living in the house you used to stay in with your grandmother! Probably she has been very near me all the time—perhaps that is why I have never felt lonely. Does your business ever take you to Girgenti?"

"I am going there very soon. They will make a great fuss about me, Signora. Money makes a vast difference! I often look back upon the old days and wonder if anything that is still to come in my life will ever compare to the dreams of my youth! As we grow older we exchange Idealism for Materialism."

"You are an Idealist still, Cavaliere; you seem scarcely to have changed at all."

He threw back his head. "Our ideals fade with our youth. But I must say good-night, Signora." He held out his hand. "You have been very kind. To-day has made the world still more wonderful."

"It is you who have been kind, Cavaliere. I have enjoyed your visit enormously. That is a truly British way of expressing my feelings, isn't it? Do you notice when we are talking in English how rough and inelegant our language is? When we speak Italian it is quite elegant." She laughed. "I have really learnt to say many pretty things in your language; it is almost more my own than English now."

"I want sincere things, Signora."

"Is sincerity restricted to plain speech?"

"In Italy insincerity is often disguised by beautiful language. I have learnt to appreciate English . . ." he paused.

"That is a polite way of referring to the lack of grace in the English language, but it is true that always when we feel most, we become most inarticulate. In Italy it is the reverse; emotion lends an Italian eloquence. English people think them insincere."

"You are kind, Signora."

"Do you remember how I used to murder Italian ten years ago?"

"Everything you ever said to me was charming, Signora."

"I thought we were to be friends, Cavaliere! I am still Scots enough to dislike flattery. You know quite well that ten years ago my Italian was excruciating—there's an adverb or an adjective or a something for you, which expresses the truth. I must often have said appalling things."

They laughed together happily.

"I have studied English, Signora, and I have spoken American for many years." Christine smiled at the distinction. "I am even familiar with American slang; I could give you lessons in it."

"How cosmopolitan you have become! Does the old Salvatore ever pop out and astonish you?"

"Tell me, Signora," he said impulsively, "where has the old Salvatore gone? I often ask myself the question. Is he roaming about Girgenti dreaming dreams and hugging ideals? Ah, Signora, he was an infinitely finer youth than the materialistic millionaire, the 'illustrious visitor.' But addio, addio." He tried to drag hmself away.

They were standing on the rough road outside the cottage; it was lined on either side by white-plastered walls, over which a wealth of southern vegetation coming from hidden gardens hung like a curtain. Fireflies were darting like golden needles. The air of the soft southern night caressed them. A lovers' heaven encircled Ischia; from end to end it was exquisitely clear and tender.

"Must it be good-bye, Cavaliere? When do you leave the island?"

He stepped quickly back to her. The night was dangerous.

"May I return, Signora? I did not like to ask."

Christine smiled at his intensity. "How much longer are you staying on the island?"

"A boat goes twice a day to Naples. It is cooler here; I can quite well do my business in Naples and live here."

"The island is delightful," she said, "at this time of the year. Look at the stars!" She threw back her head. "I have become truly Italian in my worship of the moon and the stars."

"Exquisite, Signora, exquisite."

It was her white throat and slim body which he meant; the stars in the heavens were to frame her. Suffering and experience had made Christine intensely desirable. There was still the bright hair, glittering and rebellious, and the fair skin; but now added to these things, there was that which had been lacking in the old Christine. Exquisite as he had thought the girl, Salvatore knew that the woman at his side was infinitely more desirable.

As they stood together under Ischia's stars, he longed to tell her how unconsciously he had waited for her for all those years. Other women had amused him—to himself he was no saint; but always they had been found wanting. He could have knelt and kissed her feet, while the night etherealised her. His wealth, for which other women had wooed him, was forgotten; his love was, as his old love had been, exquisitely humble. He was the digger Salvatore, she was the 'bionda Inglese,' the lady whose hands he never dared to shake. As he recalled the fact, he raised one to his lips. With a married woman, custom permitted it.

"May I return, Signora?" His eyes entreated her, while they troubled her.

"Arrivederci, Cavaliere. If you are remaining on the Island we shall surely meet again."

He dropped her hand. "Arrivederci, Signora."

As he walked slowly up the hill to his hotel, whose windows looked out upon a scene of incomparable beauty and whose gardens invited reverie and romance, his thoughts embraced the slender figure which had turned abruptly into his grandmother's cotage.

CHAPTER XIX

The next day when Christine was at work at the Baths she had to listen to a great deal of gossip about the millionaire. He was the hero of the hour; his donations and immediate help to the suffering were the unending topics of conversation. He was to rebuild, in a more sanitary fashion, almost every cottage which had been destroyed.

And he was a man of their Island! His good looks and charm of manner had of course won all hearts. Many people remembered him when he was a little dark-eyed boy, as thin as a stick and as beautiful as a child saint. His mother's delicate beauty was still fresh in the memory of the elderly women of the island.

He was to pay a visit to the baths that morning. In his speech of the day before he had said that there was a great future in store for the island, that the baths must again become as renowned and popular as they were in

Roman times. In the opinion of experts, their waters had curative powers excelled by none in Europe. Visitors must flock to Ischia for treatment, as they flocked to the expensive German baths, for Ischia had a climate to offer invalids which it was impossible to find in countries further North. But invalids would not come to the island until things were conducted at the baths in a more modern and hygienic manner. Italy was, speaking generally, too contented with inferior methods and too ready to leave things to chance. He meant, if possible, to bring new life into the island by developing its natural wealth; he had seen cures worked by the Ischian waters which had taken his breath away; they were equal to the miraculous cures of Lourdes or Loretto.

While Christine was working she heard his speech discussed by the attendants. She glowed inwardly with the secret knowledge and pride that this benefactor and illustrious visitor was nearer in thought and feeling to herself than to anyone else in the island. His visit to her the day before had given her food for much reflection. Even while she hoped to see him again she dreaded doing so.

While she was planning out her future attitude towards him, a cry burst out: "Evviva Salvatore! Evviva il Cavaliere Mazzini, nostro Salvatore!"

Christine went on with her work. She was massaging a little girl who was almost a cripple; she had lived all her life in a malarious swamp south of Naples. All the other attendants and most of the patients who could hurry into their clothes, rushed to the public rooms of the building to see the Cavaliere. A guilty sense of embarrassment kept Christine from joining them.

She determined to let the Cavaliere get safely out of the building before she changed her professional clothes for her plain black gown. She had suddenly become nervous and afraid of their possible meeting. If she did not see him again she need not tell him the truth about her husband. She was ashamed of the whole thing. Her story as it would have to be told was so very ordinary and ugly; it would be better to let him leave the island without seeing her again. Why tell him anything more about her miserable marriage? She even went so far as to plan in her mind a sure means of evading the Cavaliere; she would pay a visit to an American friend, who was married to an Italian naval Captain. They lived in a romantic old castle some distance from Casamicciola. She had been a patient of Christine's at the baths.

But her plans for evading Salvatore did not fall in with the plans of the Ruling Hand. On her return to her cottage she found on her kitchen table a basket of fruit which must have come by the early boat from Naples.

"Such fruit! All out of season, of course!" Christine said as she looked at it.

In the bottom of the basket she discovered a box of chocolates which must have cost, according to her ready reckoning, about as much as her wages for a whole week. She buried her face in the Neapolitan violets which had been laid on top of the fruit to keep it cool.

"How awfully dear of him!" she said. "How awfully dear and sweet of him! I wonder if he knows that I haven't tasted a chocolate for years? Sweets are a luxury in Italy, where sugar has always been expensive."

While she ate a chocolate she searched the basket to see if there was any note in it; but there was nothing. While she was feeling half relieved at the fact and half disappointed a knock came at the door. Her cry of "Avanti" was answered by a radiant Salvatore, who held out both his hands to her.

"Come sta, Signora?"

Christine laughingly said that she was very well. His boyish eagerness amused her. Where was the materialistic business man, whose whole soul was immersed in water-resisting paint?

"Signorina Primavera," he said laughingly, "let us be young again. Senta, I have something to suggest." His air of possession thrilled her. "Tell me," he said gaily—he was speaking in Italian—"will you grant me a favour, give me a great pleasure?"

"I must know what it is first, Cavaliere." He still clasped her hands; his eyes both demanded and pleaded. "I am too old and wise to make rash promises."

"When I leave Ischia, will you come to Naples? My sister is there—will you be her guest for one day and then come with us to Sicily?"

"No! No! Cavaliere!" Christine's cry was an immediate and frightened refusal. She tried to turn from him and withdraw her hands; her eyes caught sight of the violets on the table. "What a beautiful gift of flowers and fruit you sent me this morning! Thank you so . . ."

He stopped her. "Signora, Signora, don't evade my request. I don't care a fig for the flowers and fruit." He held her hands still more firmly and turned her round until she faced him again. "Tell me, am I asking too great an honour? Is the old Salvatore still in your mind? Is he, Primavera, still the mender of images? To the islanders he is a millionaire, a great Signore. To you, Signora, whose opinion he so much more values, is he still the old Salvatore, the foolish youth who was sent back to his cottage like a dog, that evening when you had allowed him to walk with you? You see, nothing of it is forgotten—everything was treasured."

"No, no, Salvatore." She pressed his hands in an eager assurance; his Christian name came affectionately from her lips. "I never thought of such a thing, you know I didn't. You lived like a peasant, but you were always quite different, different . . ." she hesitated ". . . . different from all the other youths in Girgenti. You were an artist." She looked up. "And a genius, Cavaliere. I told my aunt even when I was a girl and knew so little, that a genius is a child of the Gods. Genius belongs to no class."

"Ah, Signora—my genius, what is it? I have invented a water-resisting paint!"

"You will do more; that is only a means to an end. Look at your industry at Licata."

"Will you come, Signora? My sister will require a companion; things have changed—she cannot wait at home until I have finished work and take her out. She wishes to go to Girgenti, to the old home."

"Girgenti!" Christine's voice shook. She felt his silent sympathy. "I have not been there, Cavaliere, since . . ." she drew her hands from his; they were only lightly held—"not since I thought there was heaven on this earth, not since I lost my beliefs and faith." She stood before him fighting for strength, strength to tell him what he ought to know. Her emotion made her maddeningly fragile in Salvatore's eyes, and exquisitely passionate.

He longed to feel her slightness lost in his strength. He wanted her so dreadfully that he was afraid of himself; he was afraid that he would spoil all his chances of future happiness by some mad act of heedless passion. How was she to know that he had really been in love with her for all those years? What woman would believe it?

"If you can look upon my sister and myself as your friends, Signora, why will you not give us the pleasure of coming with us to Sicily?" He paused. "You need not go to Girgenti if you would rather not; you could remain in Syracuse."

Christine contrived to shake off her serious manner. She resolved to be flippant, less sympathetic.

"The old Christine is dead," she said. "I have seen nothing of her for years, Cavaliere—the silly sentimental girl who visited you in Girgenti is a thing of the past. If the new Christine went to Sicily she would go to Girgenti just to prove to herself how dead the old Christine is." She smiled. "Do you know what the new Christine said the moment she opened your box of chocolates?"

"Tell me." His eyes were alight.

"Oh, nothing romantic or gracious. She just said, 'They must have cost him as much as my whole food for a week.' "

"Cara, Signora!" His face became agonised. He instantly pictured her as she had come to his cottage, dressed as she was dressed in the old days, and carrying in her hands a soft gold purse, studded with jewels. "Signora, and I have so much! In the old days it was I who only tasted meat on festas. I understand, I know!"

"If you hadn't known and hadn't understood, I shouldn't have told you; it is because you know and understand that we can be true friends." She looked at him with grave eyes. "I always thought somehow that you would come into my life again; and yet I only saw you . . . how often?" She asked the question absently.

"Three times, Signora, but I had seen you always; you only materialized that afternoon—you had always been a part of my life. The subliminal I expected you to come some time."

She tried to speak lightly. "Wasn't it funny of me?"

"You had money, you wanted a Venus, and all I had to offer you was a lot of damaged gods."

They were wandering from the point. Christine was piping the tune, but Salvatore was not going to dance to it any longer; he was determined to obtain her promise.

Time had flown and she had not made her confession. She knew now that she would not make it. A fierce desire had come to her to enjoy herself, to accept the happiness which had been thrown in her way, to accept it as a gift from the gods. She would go with the Mazzinis to Sicily if she found that Zita really wanted her. Yet even to herself she still pretended that she had not made up her mind that she would go.

"Will you be kind, Signora? Will you let me have one of the few personal pleasures which my 'new money' can give me? Believe me, Signora," he added gravely, "being wealthy by no means fills one's youthful ideas. I prefer a simple life; I hate show. And the things we desire most are the things which money cannot buy. For instance, this trip to Sicily with you and Zita—it would be so delightful that it would make up for all the years . . ." he hesitated and then went on, hurriedly finishing his sentence as he had not meant to, "of uncongenial work."

Christine knew what he meant, but she made no answer.

He waited for a few moments and then said, "Will you come, Signora? Don't put me off with some trivial excuse."

"I must consider. How can I decide at once?"

"No, no, you must not take time or you will say no. Will you come for a little time, just to see the Laughing Land in the gayest months of the year? Ah! Signora, we will go to the Fields of Enna and gather narcissi where Prosperine and her maidens gathered them; we will go to Syracuse, to Cicero's beloved Syracuse, where the people are gentle and where Pan still pipes and Cyane haunts the tall papyrus which fringes the banks of the Anapo; we will go to Palermo, where Norman splendour and Arab fantasy have bestowed romance on every street and building! You will come, cara Signora? We will all be young again and give ourselves to Sicily! We will cast our troubles into Charybdis and . . ."

"In Sicily I used to sing an old hymn, which went like this:" Christine began to sing, "There is a land of pure delight, where saints immortal dwell. I changed the word 'saints' into 'gods' to suit my surroundings."

"That is no answer, Signora. My sister will be happy. She has not forgotten La Primavera; she knows I have met you. I wrote to her last night; we have no secrets from each other. I think you will like her, Signora."

"If Zita will write me her true wishes, Cavaliere, I will." Christine spoke slowly and hesitatingly. "If the letter tells me that she will really welcome me, I will come."

He laughed happily. "Then you are coming! Ah, Signora, what if I awake," he threw out his hand, "awake and find that after all this is only a dream, only another of the old dreams?"

"Then you must go to sleep and dream again, Cavaliere."

"Gia, gia, Signora, I must go to sleep again." He sighed. "If we only had more faith, amica mia, what suffering we might save ourselves! If I could have trusted! But our faith is so feeble, it cannot move even an anthill. Meeting you again makes me ashamed of my lack of trust, my . . ." he stopped.

"As for me, I live from day to day; I have had to. And I am really thankful for each happy hour. I never used to be grateful; now it seems to me that life is quite wonderful if one is not *un*happy. Peace and kindly fellowship are so good. When I was young I took these things for granted, now I know how precious they are."

"Primavera! Primavera!" His voice was broken. He dared not look into her calm eyes; their tragedy lashed his manhood.

"Peace and sunshine and nothing to be afraid of—these things are not the daily lot of every woman, Cavaliere."

"That you should have learnt that!" He longed to offer her a new world, a world of pleasure and wealth and devotion, but he added nothing to his simple words.

"Far better women than myself have learnt it, Cavaliere." She smiled into his anxious eyes. "But don't look so grave, for as you say, in Sicily we will let the years roll back, we will forget, we will expect what youth expects and not be content with an absence of apprehension and fear."

"No, no. For me, Signora, I will hold on to the present. Zita will have to tell no more lies, for you will be with us." He laughed as he looked at his watch. "You will be with us all day long, and Zita will be your willing slave." He held out his hand. "Now I can work for twenty-four hours without feeling tired." He said good-bye.

"Must you be going? Christine looked troubled. Again, she was letting him leave her without telling him the truth; she was permitting this intimacy while he was in ignorance of her position. There was no doubt that he thought she was a widow.

"I must, Signora. Zita will write to you; you will be ready."

"How can I come like this?" she asked. "It is my best frock." She looked at her plain black dress. It was made simply and in no modern fashion, not unlike the plain Mass black of the humble Sicilian matrons.

Salvatore thought that she looked enchanting. Certainly its simplicity showed to advantage her fair throat and wrists; they looked white and rounded against the severe black lines of the sleeves and neck.

"Veramente, Signora." His eyes worshipped her. "Yes, surely, just like that. You were not too grand a lady to go with my little sister when she could not even aspire to a hat, when she had only a black shawl to cover her head. I like you in black, Signora," he said in the same breath. "It is very distinguished. But how well I remember your white dress and your white hat and your silk stockings! Zita loved then all, Signora, and best of all the little wrist-watch and the gold purse. I loved them too, but now I love this best," he touched her black cashmere gown. "I love my Lady of Succour best of all."

"Hush," she said, "you must not be romantic. We are to be friends, just true friends if I am to come to Sicily. That is the bargain."

"I swear, Signora, that our friendship shall not be sacrificed." He laughed. "But poor human nature—it is so weak," he shrugged his shoulders, "or so masterful—it has a way of scattering our best intention to the wind."

"Yes," she said, "we mean to be so strong." She spoke regretfully. "I meant to be so strong this very afternoon." She tried to detain him; he saw her anxiety.

"Don't be too strong, Primavera—leave that to me."

He gave her no chance of revoking or of confession, for as he said the words he left her.

CHAPTER XX

Christine was annoyed with herself. She had missed Salvatore during his absence from Ischia and she had not wanted to miss him. He had stayed in Naples without coming to the island, as he had intended to do, every evening, and the days had dragged horribly, and, as she had confessed to herself, bored her almost to tears.

During his absence she had received a letter from Zita; it arrived the morning after Salvatore left her, with the half-promise that if Zita was really anxious to have her, she would seriously consider the fact of going to Sicily as their guest.

Christine had recognized at once that it was the letter of a lady, and a very charming one. The notepaper was faultless, though in keeping with the vogue of the day; there was no scent about it and no pale mauve or pink tints. There was, in fact, nothing which the vulgarised Italian adores. This was a distinct relief to her.

"Dear Signora," it ran,

"My brother has told me of his meeting with you and that you have almost consented to come with us to Sicily. I can scarcely believe it is true. It seems so wonderful after all these years! I have not forgotten you—indeed, whenever we talk about the old Girgenti days, which is very often, Salvatore and I always think and talk of you.

"I have been staying in Pompeii with some friends, but I am coming with Salvatore to Ischia to see you and to tell you what I find very difficult to express in a letter—the really sincere pleasure it will give me if you will come to Sicily.

"Until we meet arrividerci, cara Signora,

"Yours sincerely,
"Zita Mazzini."

It was difficult for Christine to realise that this note had been written by her little "daughter of the gods." It was as characteristic of the change which had taken place in the circumstances of the brother and sister as anything that could have happened. Christine had pondered over it and examined it in every detail, while her conscience was reminding her that the very fact of the note being the note of a refined gentlewoman made it all the more necessary for her to tell Salvatore of her true position. The note showed her that in all probability there would be nothing about Zita which would jar her or prevent her accepting her also as her social equal, and thus carrying things still further on the tide of romance.

The letter suggested that wealth had not spoilt Zita. She wondered if it had made her more ordinary, less interesting, and if she had kept her looks? Of course it was no use judging by Salvatore's opinion of her, for he obviously still thought her perfect. Christine quite well remembered how her husband had assured her that Zita would probably look old and haggard as soon as she had passed out of girlhood. Well, she was a girl no longer from the Sicilian point of view, but then she had been spared all privation and the exhaustion of a southern climate. She could not picture her little Greek figurine dressed up in flimsy up-to-date clothes. Would she suit them as perfectly as she had suited her black shawl or bright handkerchief worn with her native dress?

The day when she had last seen Zita came vividly to her mind—the hour they had spent together in the cake-shop, and Andrea's desire to dismiss the girl and spend the time with herself. Then equally clearly she visualised the crestfallen Salvatore who had been sent back to his cottage by her domineering lover. She remembered her own feeling of shame at his dismissal, and how quickly it had been swept away by Andrea's new air of proprietorship. She smiled bitterly at her own foolishness, her total lack of discernment. The ex-riding master in a military gymnasium, the son of a Croatian tailor, was too fine a gentleman to associate with Salvatore Mazzini!

"Ah, but he was clever," she spoke dreamily, "clever and amazingly subtle." How craftily he had poisoned her mind and vilified the man he was using for his own ends!

But surely that had all happened in her last incarnation, all that belonged to the girl Christine who, she had assured Salvatore, was dead. She looked at herself in the mirror which hung on the wall. She still looked young, whatever she felt, and as she had said many times before she said again: "Because in the old days I rashly exchanged a dull life of ease and luxury for less than six months of mad happiness—if I could call it happiness—I am not going to consider my life finished or the world my enemy!"

Her commonsense had so often reminded that she herself had been to blame. She had married a man about whom she knew practically nothing, and he had turned out ten times worse than all that her aunt had predicted. Well, her Scots pluck had saved her. Since she had cut herself adrift from Andrea and had said good-bye to her old ideas of happiness, she had been happy, happy because her health was good and the people in her simple world were kind and lovable.

Since she had parted with Salvatore she had passed many useless hours in arguing with her conscience. She wanted to go to Sicily, and she was going, but that did not prevent her pretending to herself that the fact was not settled.

Quite apart from her conscientious scruples she wondered if the situation would be too difficult. Would she ever get accustomed to it and forget the old days? It certainly would be amusing to see Zita in her new rôle. Then there was the fear that she herself might constantly "put her foot in it" by reminding the girl of what she probably wished to forget. Would Zita be well bred enough to stand the test? In fact, was she as perfect a lady as Salvatore was a gentleman? That remained to be seen. The experience would certainly be a novel one.

The curious thing was that when she was with Salvatore she never for one moment remembered the fact that he had once been beneath her socially; when it occurred to her it was in a humorous and almost unbelievable fashion.

On the evening which was fixed for Salvatore's return to the island with Zita, Christine put on her hat and wandered down to the port. In Ischia almost all the seaport-towns are dirty; Casamicciola is the exception. Even in the tiny island there is room for southern extremes, both in the people and in the vegetation. Some patches of the island are filthy and foul-smelling, with no redeeming charm; other parts are superlatively beautiful. To a stranger its beauty is tragic because of the tale it tells of its successive destructions; they can be read in the landscape and in the character of the people.

On the blue sea the boat came nearer and nearer to Casamicciola harbour. Christine's breath came more and more quickly; her pretended calm vanished. During her two days of boredom she had passed many milestones on her sentimental journey, a journey which could have but one end.

She would have scouted the idea that she was in love with Salvatore Mazzini, because she did not know, for so far nothing had shown her what her life in the south had done for her.

When we speak of the effect of climate we refer more generally to physical well-being. But the effect of climate is much further-reaching; temperamentally its effects are limitless. Christine had lived in a land where Nature exhausts herself with the exuberance of living, a world where the vegetation is but the outward and visible sign of the intensity of human nature. In Ischia the homely valerian becomes a shrub; its heavy flowers are as pink and full of colour as a Dorothy Perkins rambler. The white cistus which covers the rocks has not even the life of a butterfly; its closed buds of the morning become scattered petals by noon.

Live and live ardently is the message which drives at the senses. Life and love and laughter are here for you to-day; to-morrow may bring tears, terror, tempests.

On this day of Salvatore's return to the island the weather was perfect; the gardens, where water was freely bestowed, were full of flowers; the sea was as blue as a sea could be. There was an air of abandonment and passion in the atmosphere which told the inhabitants that spring had given place to summer, that spring, with its light touch, had once more become a tender memory.

As soon as the boat touched the pier Salvatore sprang ashore. Christine strained her eyes to see beyond the crowd, for with him was the daintiest, prettiest little figure she had ever seen. Even from a distance she could see that as a modern girl Zita was a huge success. Although she was dressed in the very latest mode, a fact which anyone can tell at a glance by the outline of a woman's figure, she was by no means a fashion-plate; she was distinctive and individual. A long grey sun-veil, which fell from her hat to the hem of her skirt, almost hid her face from Christine, who had managed to elbow her way through the crowd to her side.

The veil was probably a wise precaution against extreme nervousness on Zita's part. It would hide her confusion if the meeting was embarrassing.

But the precaution was quite unnecessary. From the moment that her exquisitely gloved hand rested in Christine's ungloved one her nervousness fled. She forgot her shyness, for Christine was kissing her. After gazing at her for a moment, Christine turned to Salvatore.

"Amico mio, she is delicious!"

Zita laughed, and her laugh was like a pigeon making love; her heart was full of happiness.

"Signora, isn't it wonderful?—after all these years, that we should meet again! La Primavera is now to be my friend."

"Yes, I'm going to be your friend and your guest—it is so kind of you." Christine's long arm was round the girl's shoulder. "We are all going to be very young again and very foolish, and so happy."

"Sicily will do you good, Signora. Salvatore says that you are very clever and very hardworked—you need a rest."

"I am all happiness to-day, Zita. But it must not be 'Signora'—it must be Zita and Christine."

Zita turned to her brother. "The Signora says I may call her by her Christian name. Don't you think she has become very like a fair Florentine, who they say can be thin without being thin, just as a Roman can be fat without being fat? You are Scots no longer, Signora. I will not call you Christine."

"Why not Primavera?" Christine smiled. She wondered if what the girl said was true.

Salvatore looked delighted. Zita gave a little cry of pleasure; it was a rebirth of the old Zita.

"Si, si! Let it be La Primavera! It shall be Zita and Primavera." She spoke in Italian; to Christine it had become instinctive.

Salvatore had left them to attend to their luggage. Zita's luggage also was so characteristic of the change in the girl that it brought a kindly smile to Christine's eyes. The dressing-case was exquisitely correct, and the long dress box foretold no creases to dainty skirts, while the copious hat-box suggested other things than black shawls.

The girl at her side was so perfectly suited to her modern luggage and so certain of herself in her new circumstances that it was very difficult to believe that the two Zitas were one and the same person.

"It is just as difficult," Christine said to herself, "to visualise her now as she was when I first knew her, as it is to recollect how a house used to look when it is transformed into a totally different class of building."

When Salvatore returned he relieved the situation, which had become a little more difficult after the first greeting was over, by explaining to Christine why the trip to Sicily had to be postponed for a few days. The business which he had had to attend to in Naples had taken longer than he expected. He had, in fact, forgotten the slow methods of Italian business men; he had grown accustomed to the rapid habits of Americans and had miscalculated the time it would require to finish the work, which he could not leave incomplete. The number of idle, black-coated limpets who clung to every State Department opened his eyes to much of which he had been ignorant in the old days; the very existence of all these poorly-paid Government clerks and officials, all of them drawing the blood out of his country's veins, had been unknown to him.

Salvatore supplied the Italian Government with "Omega," his water-resisting paint, at a price far below that at which he had sold it to any other Government. From the Italian Admiralty he was content to receive a very meagre profit; but alas! he had found it necessary to trace a very considerable leakage to its source. Government paint supplied by his firm was finding its way into private concerns; the old story of bribery and corruption was at work.

This unpleasant discovery had been the reason of the postponement of the trip to Sicily.

It did not surprise Christine, who would, indeed, have been much more surprised if Salvatore had done what he hoped to do in the time he had arranged.

It was almost impossible to talk about anything which really mattered during their walk from the port to the hotel, for Salvatore had to speak to at least half the passengers who had travelled in the boat with him, and the noise of the horse's hoofs on the stone-paved road made hearing an effort.

When they reached their destination Christine promised that she would return later on and dine with them in the garden of the old-fashioned hotel, from whose dark arbours in the daytime you can look out upon dazzling sunshine and a blue sea; and at night upon a dream-world, where fireflies flash against the darkness of the sky, which is no darker than the blue of wet passion flowers.

. . . .

At seven o'clock Salvatore appeared at Christine's door. The pleasure of being alone with her sent him to her before she was ready to leave her cottage. She laughingly told him that he had come too soon.

"I want to do my hair, Cavaliere," she said, "and I do it here—there isn't sufficient light in my bedroom—so you must go."

"I suppose it is a sacred rite which I may not witness?"

They both laughed. She shook her head.

"Yes, very sacred. The transformation would shock you—it all comes off."

"Squisito," he said softly, "squisito."

Christine affectionately turned him out into the street with the promise that she would be ready in a quarter of an hour. For a moment she stood lost in thought. She knew that it was not necessary to "dress" for dinner in an hotel in Ischia, but she also knew that Zita would wear just the right sort of gown—the girl's taste in dress was unmistakably correct. Until she had seen Zita's clothes she had not thought about her own.

"Clever, clever little Zita!" she said to herself. "You are absolutely 'it.' You were the Venus for which I once asked Salvatore in vain; my dear little Greek figurine was adorable and scarcely real; the new Zita is a modern woman, perfectly turned out, and extraordinarily feminine."

Again before she was ready for him Salvatore's knock came at the door.

She opened it. Her smile at his impatience made him hunger for an embrace.

"Shall I do?" she said cheerfully. "I told you that this was my best dress, and this cloak is a relic of my Tunis days," she held out the corner of a burnous which she had thrown over it. "It has been a faithful friend—it won't wear out and no sun fades it."

Salvatore was looking at her admiringly. The glorious colour of the cloak and its graceful folds suited her to perfection. Christine knew it.

"It is perfect, Signora. That is what the Arabs call 'sunset colour,' and these are the very few folds you get in a Tanagra figurine." He let his hands slip down the fine cloth of the burnous. "The East is so sure," he said. "It never errs, when it is the East; it is only the new East which can be so horribly wrong."

"I used to say that about Sicily," she said. "Where Sicily was content to be Sicily, she was perfect; where she had become western, she was . . ." Christine threw up her head.

"Senta, Signora, tell me—has the West spoilt my sister? Zita is no longer Sicilian—has she stood the grafting? I want your true opinion."

"Zita!" Christine cried. "Oh, Salvatore, Zita is adorable! I never saw such a tempting little creature in my life!" Their eyes met. "Life is awfully interesting, Salvatore! I should have said 'Cavaliere'—you have persistently said 'Signora.' "

"No, no! Let it be Salvatore—to you I must always be Salvatore, just the old Salvatore who would willingly have dug night and day if he could have found a Venus for his wonderful visitor."

"I think of you as Salvatore of course," she spoke softly, "but hadn't I better call you Cavaliere?"

"No, no," he said. "If you think of me as Salvatore, let it be Salvatore."

They paused to look at the scene behind them.

"Does Ischia stand the test of revisiting?" she asked. "The castles of our youth shrink into hovels when we see them with grown-up eyes."

Salvatore looked tenderly at the view spread before him. "Ischia is beautiful," he said. "And does it please you as it pleases me to remember that Vittoria Colonna found it so beautiful that in the autumn of her life she lived in that castle out there, and wrote from it her wonderful letters to Michelangelo?"

"Yes, I know," Christine said. "And another picturesque person lived there—the great Hohenstaufen."

Salvatore smiled. "Yes, but Frederick of Hohenstaufen built it on the site of an older fortress and city, which is interesting to us because the original castle was built by the Syracusans when they wished to establish a small colony on the rock to do honour to their king Hiero."

"I think the Castle of Ischia touches the very zenith of romantic beauty," Christine said. "I remember how it fascinated me years ago when I first saw it rising out of the water like an enchanted fortress in a mediæval legend."

When she had finished speaking their glowing eyes met.

"I remember, Signora—in Girgenti, in Casa Salvatore, you told me that you longed to visit the island."

"I believe I did. But fancy you remembering that!" Christine's eyes dropped. "What a prodigious memory you have got!"

"You are not really surprised; my memory is not at all wonderful!"

"To me it is," Christine said with mock lightness. "You make me ashamed of mine."

As she spoke they entered the hotel. With Zita there would be less chance of conversation drifting into dangerous channels. During their short walk Salvatore's eyes had made her say to herself over and over again, "In Sicily we must be three, not two. I must keep Zita beside me."

Their dinner which had been specially prepared for them, was eaten in a round arbour, which looked over luxurious gardens and the sea. Christine did not hesitate to tell Zita how much she was enjoying the excellent chicken and good caramel pudding—a very simple meal, but with the addition of a well-dressed salad and some beautiful fruit and sweets, which Salvatore had bought in Naples, it was to Christine a banquet. She enjoyed it just as much as Zita would have done ten years ago.

"My usual evening meal," she said, "consists of an egg when they are very cheap, and some figs; in the cooler weather I have a cup of chocolate and some brown bread and butter. I am so fond of the rough native bread with little pine seeds on the top of it. Do you remember it, Zita?"

"Of course I do, Signora." She laughed as gaily as a child at Christine's question. "Why, in the old days even that bread was only for festa days, wasn't it, Salvatore? With perhaps a poor little goldfinch to flavour a big dish of macaroni. We called that meat, Signora."

"Who said Signora?" Christine cried.

Zita's eyes shown with happiness. "But that is true, Primavera. And after that in Rome—do you remember, Salvatore, even the one goldfinch was too costly? Ah, Sign . . ." she stopped herself, "No, no, I mean Primavera."

"Were you poorer after I left?"

"Much poorer, Sign . . ." Zita laughed again, "Primavera. May I tell her, Salvatore?"

They were drinking their after-dinner coffee. The brother and sister looked at each other.

"Certainly, if she cares to hear the story of our woes." Christine smiled encouragingly to Zita.

"Well, when we left Girgenti we had a little money; it was to be spent on Salvatore's work. It seemed to both of us at the time a great deal—oh, so much! Do you remember, fratello mio?"

The colour mounted to Christine's cheeks. She looked at Salvatore nervously. Was she, after all, to hear the story her husband had told her? Where had that money suddenly come from?

"We thought the money would keep us in Rome for as long as it would have kept us in Girgenti. We soon found out our mistake. Signora, in a large city you have to breathe gold. Poor Salvatore worked and worked and he grew thinner and thinner; I could have earned money as a model, but he would not let me. It was terrible, for I could do nothing, nothing but see him get paler and paler and thinner and thinner."

Christine had laid a sympathetic hand on Zita's arm; her eyes were fixed on the girl's beautiful face.

"Don't tell all that, Zita—it is past and over. It is not mirth-making." Salvatore had hastily interrupted her.

"But it is so interesting. Tell me how it all ended—what saved you? Don't stop her, Salvatore; please let me hear."

"Salvatore gained a big prize at the Accademia and on the very same day almost that it was awarded to him he was introduced to a business man from America." Zita paused and then went on breathlessly: "His partner had seen and spoken to Salvatore when we were in Girgenti." She paused again.

To break the tense silence which followed Christine said, "And then?"

"From that day fortune favoured us. At first it came gradually, didn't it, Salvatore? Then later on, all of a sudden, Salvatore's discovery of water-resisting paint changed our comfort into luxury, and for the last five years, Primavera, we have had more money per hour than we had per year in Casa Salvatore."

"I am so glad," Christine said, "so awfully glad!" Her voice betrayed the very genuine emotion which she felt. Because she felt deeply she was tongue-tied. There was something pathetically romantic about the life-story of the brother and sister. If she had been alone with Zita she would have asked her what had happened to the youth who had spoken to her in the cake-shop. But with Salvatore listening to their conversation it was difficult. The fact that Zita had not married looked as if the broken romance to which Salvatore had alluded had hurt the girl more than her gay manner suggested.

As Christine visualised the meeting between Zita and the young man in the shop she could not help smiling. How ill-suited he would now appear to the Zita who sat beside her!

In a way it seemed to have happened only yesterday; it was all so vivid. And yet when she thought over the great changes which had taken place during the years which had parted them, it seemed like a century. All that she herself had suffered and all that she had thrown off as of no account passed quickly before her eyes. The amazing thing was that she was still young and that her looks had improved with keeping. Life is a strange problem. How could it be explained? For she had endured youth-killing things—shame, remorse and disillusionment. And yet here she was, wanted by these two dear wealthy people, who were going to spoil her and pet her and adore her. And she was going to let them spoil her, she was going to give herself up to their whim and thoroughly enjoy herself.

The good dinner which she had eaten made her think longingly of the fleshpots of Egypt. Having enough to eat of cheap food is a very different thing from dining well, and Christine had lived on the edge of things for so long that sufficiency had become to her almost as extraordinary as luxury.

She saw a picture of herself massaging her patients until the beads of perspiration trickled from her forehead. The heat from the sulphur baths was quickly reducing her already slender figure to the merest shadow. But she was going to say good-bye to rheumatic limbs and the steaming heat of the baths; she was going to change all that for the Hotel Igeia, at Palermo, that superb invasion of Monte Carlo into Sicily, and the Hotel San Domencio in Taormina.

As the Mazzinis were extremely rich, and they had none of the expenses which are attached to property and inherited wealth, allowing for the fact that Salvatore gave large sums to charities, Christine knew that they had an abundance to spend on personal pleasures and luxuries.

These thoughts had been in the back of her mind while she talked to Zita and Salvatore about other things. Her visit to Sicily as their guest would mean nothing in the matter of expenditure.

As the evening advanced she wanted more and more to hear from Salvatore's own lips the denial of the slander which had been deliberately planned to put an end to their old intimacy. Yet something held her back. She did not wish to introduce her husband's name. If she spoke about him again she would certainly have to tell them that he was alive, and on this first night with Zita, why bring a cloud on the horizon?

Salvatore had become grave and silent; Zita had done all the talking.

"Do you sing, Primavera?" she asked. "It is just the evening for a song."

"I once thought I could sing," Christine laughed, "but that was before I knew Italy. The most ignorant peasant here knows how to produce her voice better than I do, after all my expensive lessons. But you sing, Zita—of course you do."

"Yes, I sing," Zita said. "Salvatore likes my voice, but not to-night, Signora—I mean, Primavera. To-night I could listen to other people singing, but I could not sing." She laid her hand on her heart. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand," Christine said. "I feel like that too."

Zita tried to smile. "Salvatore says my voice is always full of tears even when I sing songs of happiness; tears of happiness would overflow to-night." She slipped her arm round Christine's waist. "Let us take a little stroll together—Salvatore is so far away; he will not come back. Look! He takes no return ticket on these journeys. I never know when to expect him home."

Salvatore lifted unseeing eyes. Zita's story had sent his mind adrift; he was the old Salvatore, miserable and ashamed; the theft of the urns seemed but yesterday. Yes, the new Christine must be told of his former dishonesty; she must hear the story from his own lips. But how was he to tell her? Why need he do it yet?

It was the same cry with Christine. It went on unceasingly: She must tell Salvatore, he must know, but how was she to do it? Why need she do it yet?

When the girls were walking arm in arm under the pergola, Zita said impulsively, "Will you be kind, amica mia? I want you to tell me something."

Christine's breath came quickly. What did the girl want to know?

"Am I in your opinion a lady? Is Salvatore's opinion of me correct? He thinks I have adapted myself very well . . ." Zita hesitated.

Christine gave a sigh of relief as she said, "You dear little Zita, I have forgotten that you were ever anything but a refined and charming woman of the world! You were always a lady, you know you were! And—isn't it funny?—I can't think of you as you used to be." She turned the girl's pleased face to hers. "You are absolutely 'it,' Zita—do you know what that means?"

"Oh, yes, I know much slang. Some Americans speak more slang than English; but Salvatore objects to it. So did the nuns."

"Well, you are absolutely 'it.' How else can I put it?"

They were talking in whispers. Salvatore was still planning and dreaming. Zita pointed to him; her eyes were tender, her lips smiling.

"Look, he is so far away, so very far."

Christine looked, and as she looked a twinge of annoyance made her withdraw her eyes. He was certainly very far away; he had apparently forgotten her presence; he seemed content to let her talk to Zita. Perhaps, like all men, if he could not monopolise her, he did not want her. She turned to Zita.

"Let's slip away—he won't notice, and I want to say so many things."

They left the pergola and walked to the far end of the rambling garden. When they had seated themselves on a marble seat which had once graced a classic villa, Zita said:

"Really, Primavera, I am so glad that you think I am 'it,'" she laughed, "that I do not look like the rich daughters of some of our peasants who go out to South America and come back millionaires. To me they look horrible in their best clothes; but one cannot see oneself, cara amica—how can one tell? These poor things think they are very refined and grand. But you have told me the truth, Signora? You have not only been polite? Long ago we both said that we preferred truth to flattery."

"Zita, you must know that you are absolutely correct." Christine looked at the girl admiringly. In the soft light of the stars, under the violet of the southern sky, she was as Christine had said to Salvatore, "delicious"; her pallor was intense and passionate. "Salvatore is awfully proud of you."

"Oh, but Salvatore is no judge. He sees me with adoring eyes. But you, Signora, you can judge because you have not seen the gradual change in my manners and dress. You are to be my friend, you should not flatter." She thought for a moment and then said apologetically, "I do try to do justice to Salvatore, so for his sake I would gladly take any hints you could give me. It is because I am so anxious to please him that I have talked so much about myself."

"I don't flatter, Zita; I remember our conversation that afternoon in Girgenti."

"Gia, gia." When Zita visualised the past intensely, the Sicilian "gia, gia," slipped naturally from her lips. "I remember—it was the day I told you a lie." She laughed. "You never guessed, Signora? You never knew?"

"But I know now, Zita. Salvatore told me. And I remember something else, which he did not tell me—in the cake-shop a young man spoke to you; I thought you cared for him. Do you remember—you asked me not to mention it to Salvatore." There was another understanding pressure on her arm. "Where is he? Did you ever see him again? I was sure he was in love with you."

"He went to the Argentine. He too is very wealthy, so I have been told. He sends frozen meat to Italy." Zita laughed. "Even a less romantic form of wealth than 'Omega.'"

"Is he married? Did you never see anything more of him?"

Zita shook her head. "I don't know—I don't think so. Ma, Signora, let's talk of happier things."

"Was there so much unhappiness?"

"No, no. Only a misunderstanding; it all seems so little now."

"Couldn't Salvatore have put it right? Was the youth jealous?"

"Salvatore knew nothing about it. Sardo . . ." she hesitated as she said the name, " . . . he did not understand . . . it was not his fault. He had every reason to suspect me . . . to think . . ." She paused.

"What did he think? Did someone tell lies about you?" Christine's cheeks were aflame; her senses told her who had been at the bottom of the mischief.

"Sardo was not to blame."

"And you cared? What a shame!"

"Perhaps not. Signora, a young girl does not know her own heart." Zita broke off impulsively. "Please do not ask me any more about it—I can never tell you all that happened. I have quite forgotten it; only seeing you has brought it back to my memory."

"I didn't mean to be inquisitive, Zita—you know that, don't you?"

"It was such a very little affair, Primavera—you must think it absurd of me even to remember it. To prove to you that I have forgotten all about it I will tell you a secret. There is someone in America who has waited for me for a long time. I would not give him any promise until I had been to Sicily. I . . ." she stopped abruptly.

"Is he an Italian?"

Zita shook her head as she said, "Oh, no."

"Tell me about him. Why have you kept him waiting?"

"I don't really know. Perhaps because I have ceased to be Sicilian and become a modern woman. I appreciate my freedom and I find no-one as charming as Salvatore. Our life together is almost perfect. When I was Sicilian I should, as you know, have married whenever I was old enough, if I was not too ugly or deformed. Now, cara amica, I do not think that marriage must be the chief end of woman. In America I have found it so disagreeable to say no; I dislike it very much, don't you? But to say yes when you mean no would be still more unkind."

Christine kissed her soft cheek impulsively. "You are a perfect duck, Zita. I wonder you haven't been gobbled up long ago. You are as pale as Dante's Beatrice; the old Zita was as sunburnt as a wall nectarine."

"I was at school so long—you forget that. I went to school when Sicilian girls get married, and I remained at school until I was twenty-one. I spent all my holidays with Salvatore, and the last school was only a Pension where the girls attended classes; we had our chaperones."

"How splendid of Salvatore!"

"He was so busy that I had no home, and I was quite unsuited to live in the fashionable world alone. My chaperone was very kind and interested in my education."

"I don't wonder, Zita. She had rather an interesting occupation, watching your development."

"I studied music and French and German, and of course I heard English all day long. I had no time for any foolishness." Zita laughed. "You know, Primavera, a rich girl has to be very wise—I did not know how wise in the old days. Money brings many admirers."

"You were always very wise, Zita mia."

"No, no, you don't know! I was very foolish!"

Christine suddenly interrupted her. She took the girl's hands in hers and held them lightly.

"Do you remember my husband?" she said breathlessly. With no preparation she suddenly found herself introducing the subject which she had determined to avoid.

Zita's eyes fell. Her hands told Christine something of what she had guessed.

"Tell me, Zita—you needn't be afraid—you can't hurt me. That life is all over and done with. I remember you used to be afraid of him, you disliked him?"

Zita's head was bowed over her hands; she avoided Christine's eyes.

"Don't ask me," she said almost in a whisper. "You loved him?"

"I once did, Zita, when I was a romantic schoolgirl."

"You were unhappy, Signora?" Zita's eyes were raised to Christine's.

"Unhappy does not express my married life, Zita. I soon gave up expecting happiness. When daily humiliations occur and go on unceasingly, one very soon does." She smiled. "For some years I endured hell; there you have my story in a nutshell. But don't let us spoil our evening by discussing my woes; they are past and done with. My quiet life in Ischia seems like having reached heaven after enduring hell."

"And he is enduring it now, cara Signora—he is enduring the suffering he deserves." She said the words vindictively; her Sicilian love of revenge rang in her voice. "I hope he is enduring the torments of an awful hell!" She paused. "Senta, Signora mia, long ago I wanted to warn you. I tried to see you, but he made it impossible. He knew I had sworn that I would tell you the sort of man he was, so he kept us apart. Then suddenly we heard that you were going to marry him, and I knew that if you loved him you would not believe anything I told you. Salvatore said it was too late, far too late."

"Listen!" Christine said; she held up her hand. "Isn't that your brother calling to us?" She was relieved by the interruption.

"Si, si! Ecco, Salvatore! Come to us—we are under the arbutus arbour."

When he reached them he was still in a detached state of mind, exquisitely gentle and appreciative of the night, and to Christine his silence was almost more eloquent than she could endure. It spoke to her super-senses; it warned her of the man's nature; it urged her to tell him the simple truth—that she was not a free woman.

And yet she was silent, although her divorce was merely a matter of expense, as silent as Salvatore, for her super-senses knew that the future was an unknown quantity. The present, so long as they remained as they were, was delightful.

"That is the old lonely, mysterious Salvatore," Zita said apologetically, "all dreams and moods; the business man is lost. I often wonder how he made a fortune." She laughed. "Salvatore says that there are two distinct Salvatores, one for America and one for the old country."

"I am glad America hasn't killed the old Salvatore, aren't you?—that his mind hasn't become all dollars and trusts!" Christine was relieved at the turn the conversation had taken. "But I must be going now—it is really quite late. It is so easy to forget in Ischia that the night is drifting into morning. There will be no sleeping time for me if I don't go; you people can steal some hours from the morning to add to your night, but I must be up betimes." She broke off suddenly. "Oh, Zita, won't Sicily be divine? No work, just sheer idleness all day long!"

"Poor Signora! I wish I could do your work for you to-morrow."

"It would be a very poor Signora indeed if I hadn't any work to get up for! There would be no polenta and not even the toe of a goldfinch in the festa macaroni."

Salvatore left them abruptly. Christine's words, which had been said humourously and with no intention of self-pity, from their very lightheartedness brought tears to his eyes.

. . . .

Silently Salvatore saw Christine to her cottage-door. He could not trust himself to speak as he walked by her side. He wondered if he could endure the strain of being in Sicily with her, if he were to keep his promise and remain her friend.

The very fact that Christine had accepted his silence, that she had not made its understanding less complete by the vulgarity of words, had unfurled the sails of his desires and set them adrift on shoreless seas.

. . . .

"Addio, Primavera," he said. "I have been a poor and stupid companion and a very remiss host." He held out his hand.

She clasped it eagerly. Christine's hands were beautifully human. "Don't say that!" she said. "If we are to be true friends we must be perfectly natural; we must be ourselves. You have many things on your mind."

"No, no!" he said impatiently. "You know it is only one thing—my promise." He looked at her. "My promise that we are to be friends."

"Oh, but we are that already!" she said with assumed lightness. "You need not look so grave."

"Cara signora," he said softly, "let your words be as sincere as your silence."

Her hand was dropped suddenly, then quickly he raised it again to his lips. Christine shivered as she felt his breath on her flesh. Salvatore's sensibilities were wounded. She was a married woman—why had she repulsed this ordinary form of politeness?

"You are not yet accustomed to our Italian courtesies, Signora? Forgive me!"

"I couldn't help it. It was silly of me, but . . ." she spoke brokenly ". . . *he* used to do it. The first time I ever saw a man kiss a woman's hand was at Girgenti; he used to kiss my aunt's hand. The memory of it came back with your kiss."

"Cara Signora, I understand. Cara Signora! Cara Signora!"

"I thought it was such a pretty custom. And now . . . !" She tried to laugh. "It always brings back his personality, and my fears, and . . ." she hesitated—"all my aunt's warnings and a host of other things which it is wiser to forget."

"Primavera! Primavera!"

Salvatore left her abruptly. His words in her ears were a wounded cry. She watched him almost run up the rough road until she could see him no longer, and then she went back to her cottage, stumbling as if she were drunk, her hands held out for guidance.

CHAPTER XXI

The trio had been a fortnight in Sicily and nothing had happened to disturb the friendly attitude which Salvatore had managed to maintain towards Christine ever since they had left Ischia. He was, of course, very wise, for if Christine had been attracted to him and had liked him very much before they went to Sicily, she had during this wonderful fortnight grown fonder and fonder of him and her respect for him had increased each day. He was keeping his pact admirably—he was, in fact, allowing Christine both to eat her cake and keep it. He was behaving outwardly as a friend, while his deeper self kept her senses tuned to concert pitch.

Salvatore was an ideal lover. Pan piped the songs which he dared not sing, while the gods lay in ambush in the hills and secret passes. For two weeks the game had gone on merrily.

Zita and Christine had become good comrades. From the day of their departure from Ischia they had arrived at an unspoken understanding—that for Christine the past was taboo.

They had arrived at Girgenti at the end of the second week. They went to a native inn, which stands up on the city bastions and commands a superb view of the distant temples and the landscape, which reaches to the sea, the country over which Salvatore had always journeyed to reach the Temple of Aesculapius.

It was a fine old inn, managed in the true Sicilian fashion. Rough terracotta jars served them for their bedroom water-jugs and the old tiled floors were carpetless. To Zita the inn was amusing and interesting; it proved to her what a long way she had travelled from the simplicity of her early days. Ten years ago it would have seemed to her very luxurious. Now her dainty clothes seemed absurd in the huge bare bedroom, which was devoid of any wardrobes. When Christine saw her very modern lingerie and delicate clothing hanging from the one peg she laughed until the tears swam in her eyes; they looked so disconsolate and pathetic, for although the room was as large as a chapel it was as bare as a barn.

But nothing could dim the radiance of those first days in Sicily, certainly not the lack of luxury. Zita had regained her girlhood, she was La Gioconda once more.

On this particular night there was to be a banquet given to Salvatore by the citizens of Girgenti; he was to be presented with the Italian equivalent of the Freedom of the City. After it was over Christine and Zita were to attend the soirée and hear the speeches.

In the afternoon they decided to pay a visit to the Casa Salvatore. When they arrived at the cottage, Christine had to be the spokeswoman; Zita was too overcome with emotion. To bring a little lightness into the situation she said to Salvatore, who was as silent as his sister:

"I am not going to ask for a Venus this time—I am coming to visit the house of a distinguished citizen. Casa Salvatore has become a "monumento nazionale.'"

He smiled. He was in a dream. The little home was unaltered, but how small it had become! He stepped inside at the gracious invitation of the yellow-faced woman, obviously a victim to fever, who was greatly surprised and honoured. How near the walls were! And the old table, how it filled the room! Zita, who had quickly regained her composure, was talking to the woman.

"Non mai, Signorina, you lived here? In this cottage?" she stared at her visitors.

"Gia, gia, Signora, I lived here and my brother used to sit here, with books on the table, so late every night that he used to fall asleep over them."

"The Cavaliere?" The woman's fever-bright eyes grew bigger; her amazement increased.

"Veramente, Signora. And my mother also lived here; she died here."

Salvatore had laid his hand on the woman's shoulder; his eyes smiled into hers. "Alas! Signora Majelli, if only my wealth could have come in time to give my mother ease and comfort!"

"Ah, Signore!" She threw up her eyes.

"I have learnt, donna mia, that money never gets near the heart of things. It still leaves happiness round the corner."

"But money is power, Signore." Her eyes became flames.

"Is power happiness, Signora?"

The woman's face changed; it became vindictive; her gracious smile was lost in the cruel expression which transformed it. "Power means revenge, Signore, and revenge is sweeter than good meat and plenty to drink! Revenge enables us to endure!"

Christine, who had been listening to the conversation, knew how Sicilian was the quick fire of anger and the woman's undying desire for revenge. She herself had suffered and had probably been treated as badly as the woman who so thirsted for her enemy's blood, yet she had not the slightest desire for revenge or wish to do her husband any harm. All she wanted was never to see or hear of him again. She looked at Salvatore. Although he was not encouraging the woman in her outburst of hate, his eyes were sympathetic; he was inside her mental attitude. Christine was not.

When Zita returned from the room which had been her bedroom, she took her brother's arm and silently they stood side by side, looking down at the floor in front of the Sicilian stove. Suddenly Zita threw herself into his arms and wept just as she had wept years ago when they had stood on the same spot looking down on the buried urns. It was only for a moment, and the little outburst and loss of control was the climax of a day of pent-up emotions.

"Forgive me, amica mia," she said to Christine. "I really felt as if my poor throat would burst if I did not cry. It is all so poignant with memories." She looked ashamed; she had behaved foolishly.

It was Christine who broke the strain of the situation. She had not guessed that there was another reason for Zita's display of emotion other than of sentiment and overstrained nerves.

"Zita mia," she said, "in that corner cupboard up there you kept the jewel-case—I remember it quite well. What if I had jumped up to look?"

"I knew you were too polite, Primavera."

"Was my second visit worth the lie?"

"Yes. And it was for Salvatore I told it," Zita whispered laughingly. "He was so good to me, and I wanted to give him pleasure."

Christine blushed. "Anyhow, you told a fib and I thought you so truthful! I did believe anything then—you know what I mean."

An expression of anguish changed Zita's face as quickly as the look of revenge had changed the yellow face of the woman.

"Don't be silly!" Christine said quickly. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I know now how absurd it was to believe anything my husband told me about Salvatore! I should have come and said good-bye to you—I could have managed to do it somehow. But when he told me that lie about him, I just said to myself, 'Then, after all, Salvatore Mazzini is just a charming liar and a clever rogue.'"

"Signora! Signora!" Zita's mind was back in the old days. Christine was the Signorina, the beautiful Primavera; this was their home; she could even smell the delicate perfume which came with her presence like the drifting scent of spring flowers. Her words were nothing, only "Signora! Signora!" Yet they made Christine stop and look at the girl wonderingly. Her face was absurdly tragic; her eyes were mysteriously eloquent.

"What have I said, Zita?" Christine whispered. "Come along—we have been too long here! I told you both that it would be trying for sensitive natures. I think I must be awfully hard, Zita—I just won't let old memories spoil my Sicily. And after all, it is I, not you, who have reason to weep!"

"You have been happy with us, Primavera?"

"Happy isn't the word, you dear child!"

"Sometimes my brother is so quiet, so abstracted, that I am afraid you may think he does not appreciate the pleasure of your society." Zita shook her head. "It is just," she smiled tenderly, "just Salvatore, Signora."

"Just Salvatore!" Christine said tenderly. "And a very good thing to be, Zita! I don't mind any of his moods, and to-night he has his great speech to make and his address to receive. No wonder he is absent-minded."

"To-night may test your true feelings for him; his speech means more to us both than you understand. But please do not ask me about it; I promised I would not tell you. Let us find Salvatore—he will be in his old workshop at the back of the cottage."

Salvatore did not hear them enter his workshop. He was seated at the old bench, with his head in his arms, which were stretched across it.

"Salvatore mio, fratello mio!" Zita's words were whispered while her arm went round his neck. She knew that he was living again in the past.

He raised his eyes and saw that Christine was with her. "Cara bambina," he said apologetically, "we have been much too long here. Come along."

In the living room the sick woman was seated in its darkest corner; her bones hated the sun. She was slowly picking some good rice from a sieve which contained about ninety per cent. of inedible rubbish. When Salvatore put a handful of silver in her wire sieve, she seized both his hands and raised them to her lips, while large tears fell into her worthless rice. The sudden possession of so much wealth was too much for her enfeebled condition. She was still thanking him and blessing him as they left the cottage. She was jangling the money in her hands; the sound of it delighted her.

As they were descending a short flight of steps which took them to their hotel, Christine slipped on a piece of orange-peel. Zita had gone ahead. As she slipped Salvatore's arms went round her; for one moment he held her crushed to his breast. Then he set her on her feet, without even asking her if she was hurt.

In that brief embrace Christine undid the work of weeks. The incident was over in less than two minutes, but it had revealed to both of them the fact that they had been lovers from the first. That quick embrace left no room for denial.

Christine had to calmly assure Zita that no harm was done, the ankle was not strained. It was difficult to speak reasonably and collectedly when nothing seemed to matter but Salvatore's embrace. It had blotted out every other feature of the day. It had warned her that she could no longer play with her own feelings. She was angry at her prosaic surroundings! she had to be dignified and conventionally pleasant, while otherwise they might have been—no, they could not be that, not yet; she must tell him first.

"I'm afraid that we must have wearied you, Primavera, with our sentimental journey," Salvatore managed to say. "Zita and I lost ourselves; the years rolled back."

Of course Christine assured them that she had not been bored, but greatly interested. And she spoke the truth, for it had been interesting from a psychological point of view. The visit to their old home had proved that Salvatore and Zita were too well-bred to understand the meaning of the word "snobbish." There was something delightfully ingenuous about Salvatore; it was his most endearing quality.

When they reached the rambling old Albergo, Zita suggested that when they had finished their tea, which she always got Christine to make—they had with them a well-appointed tea-basket—they should lie down and rest until it was time for Salvatore to go to the banquet. Salvatore seconded the idea; Zita looked tired, and while they rested he would go over his speech and make himself word-perfect.

CHAPTER XXII

Some hours later, as they entered the crowded hall where he was to deliver his speech, Zita slipped her hand into Christine's arm. The girl's eyes expressed emotion.

She said earnestly, "Primavera, I told you that this speech may make a difference to our position in your eyes. You will be surprised. He has something to announce to the people which will astonish you."

Christine did not answer. There was nothing to be said; but she wondered what he could have to tell the people that mattered so greatly. Why had he never alluded to it? Anyhow, it could be nothing which could affect her feelings for him.

Although he could not see her, he knew the moment she entered the building. He was on the platform, seated in the centre of a group of important citizens, who were all very grave and heavy with official responsibility. An illuminated address was to be presented to Salvatore by the Sindaco, who made a flowing and eloquent speech on behalf of the magistrates and the citizens of Girgenti. In it he welcomed the illustrious Cavaliere back to his old home. Girgenti was proud of Salvatore Mazzini; he was the type of citizen to whom everyone could point as an example of all that was best in a Sicilian gentleman and a patriot. For himself, he could only say that he could wish for no greater good fortune than that his two sons should take Salvatore as their example. If either of them should ever achieve the position which the Cavaliere held in the opinion of the citizens of Girgenti, he would be a proud father.

This and much more of a similar nature was poured out with true Sicilian eloquence and elegance of expression. Salvatore was thanked for the many benefits which he had conferred on the town, such as the Chair which he had founded at the University for Archæological Research, and the Hospital for Children which his enthusiasm had started and his liberal donations made possible.

Christine listened eagerly to every word of the Sindaco's speech. It was all new to her, for neither Zita nor Salvatore had ever mentioned any of these things. Her spirits rose as she heard them; her heart was full of pride. She was too shy to take more than a glance at Salvatore, who was very pale and nervous. He could not, she knew, be feeling nervous in the ordinary sense of the word, not nervous in such a gathering, when he must have been entertained very often in a much more imposing manner and have spoken on occasions of far greater importance. But it is always more trying to fill the position of a hero or of a celebrity amongst one's own people. In Girgenti Salvatore was in his own family circle; familiar faces, old smiles and peculiar gestures met his eyes whichever way he looked.

"Come sta?" was called out to him every other minute; sometimes he was "Signore" or "Cavaliere"; other times it was "Nostro Salvatore" or "Salvatore lui stesso" (Salvatore himself).

Zita, in her fashionable clothes, had at first struck fear into their hearts; they stood more in awe of her than of Salvatore, until the girl spoke to them and won their hearts by her simplicity. Then she was "La Gioconda," "bambina Zita," "the little orphan." They would have been hard hearts indeed which were not won by the girl's charm and beauty.

"Isn't it fun," she would say with laughing lips and friendly eyes, "isn't it fun to see your little orphan turned into a grand lady? But do you know, no cakes ever taste like the cakes you used to send us each Pasqua? We never forget them."

When Salvatore rose to make his speech, he was so pale and nervous that Zita's hand found its way into Christine's. Her tightening grasp told Christine how agitated the girl was. There must be some strange reason for her anxiety, for the Cavaliere was known to be a fine speaker.

Salvatore had raised his hand. The cheering was deafening, but his hand was eloquent. Hands as well as lips speak in Sicily, and Salvatore's raised hand begged for silence.

"Silenzio," he said, "per piacere aspetta." There was a sudden quietness, a tense quietness of roused expectancy. This was a new and striking way to begin a popular speech. He had silenced their welcome!

"Onorevoli Signori," Salvatore said as he bowed to the Sindaco and to the grave cittadini on the platform: "Onorevoli Signori," he said again as he faced the audience; "Miei amici, I must ask you to wait until I have told you what I have long wanted to tell you, before you give voice to your expression of welcome. If after that you still think me worthy of this address and of your friendship, then please raise your voices and give me welcome."

There was an attempted interruption. Cries of "Viva Salvatore!" "Nostro Salvatore!" rang through the hall.

"Aspetta, aspetta!" he said gravely. "I am going to tell you my story in as few words as possible." He smiled. "You must bear with me, for I am afraid that like many others, I have lost my native grace of speech in America. In my pursuit of wealth I have lost better things."

There were cries of "No! No!"

He held up his hand. "Senta, this is my story: Once upon a time I was very poor, you all know how poor. So poor that very often I should have slept better at night if I had been less hungry. But I was ambitious, intellectually ambitious and curious. I had no thoughts in those days of great wealth; I only wanted money enough to study for two years at the University and to help me to carry out my dream of reviving one of the old earthenware industries of Sicily. I was earning at that time one franc forty per day; there is not much to be saved off that. But I had the means of adding a little to my income by selling to the forestieri who came to see the temples the small objects I dug up which the Museum did not want or the archæological authorities did not wish to keep." Salvatore paused.

Zita's fingers were crushing Christine's hands. A flash of understanding suddenly came to Christine. Her whole being waited for Salvatore's next words; her lips were tightly closed.

"I was trusted," Salvatore said very slowly and distinctly. "I was trusted." The words rang through the building. "I was trusted, my friends, by the authorities and by every-one. Onorevoli Signori, miei amici, I betrayed that trust."

There was a low cry through the audience: "No! No! non e vero! Impossibilé!"

Salvatore's voice rose above the cries. "Si, si, Signori, I betrayed that trust. I was under an oath that I would show all that I found, all buried treasure, to the local authorities and to my employer; all objects of any particular value or interest which I found were taken away from me."

Cries of "Shame! Shame!" interrupted him.

"No, no, Signori. It was just and right. They were the treasures of Girgenti; they belonged to Girgenti. I was only paid for finding them." He held up his hand. "Will you not listen to the rest of my confession? One day by accident I found two Greek urns, marvels of ancient Greek art. They had been made for prizes to be given to the heroes in some games. They were worth a large sum of money." He paused.

Christine, who had not dared to look at his eyes, was watching the nervous twisting of his fingers; her own fair cheeks were burning.

"Signori," he said, "I kept those two urns. I showed them to only one person, my accomplice." Salvatore's voice broke.

A cry of sympathy rang through the hall, cries of "Quite right! Quite right! They were yours! Who finds keeps!"

"My friend, I have not finished. My accomplice helped me to sell them; he sent me a purchaser, a wealthy American who was ignorant of the sin I was committing. I shared the money with my companion in dishonesty." He paused, and as he paused his eyes met Christine's. "Will you hear the rest of my story?" he addressed the audience.

Cries of "Si! Si. Caro amico! Caro Salvatore!" gave him courage.

"I thought I was rich. I went to Rome. My sister and I nearly starved. In that great capital, the sum which I had thought so vast proved very, very little. But, Signori, I succeeded. Everything I did seemed to bring me good luck. You all know by this time that my fortune was not made off the small industry which I have started at Licata." He smiled. "It *costs* me a fortune, my friends."

He took a sip of water from the tumbler at his side. His nervousness was disappearing as the attitude of his audience became more and more reassuring. His earlier pallor and agitation were not so noticeable. Zita had loosened her grip on Christine's hands.

"I have one thing more to tell you," he said. "During the last two or three years I have become a wealthy man, but I have always felt that the foundation of my wealth was built upon dishonour."

Cries of "No! No! Signore!" rose once more.

"Yes, Signori, I could not have gone to Rome without that sum of money."

"The urns were yours—you found them . . ."

"I stole them. Give the words their true meaning. I stole them and bitterly have I regretted my dishonesty." He turned to the Sindaco. "Onorevoli Signori, I am in your hands, but before you sentence me let me tell you that the first thing I did when I was well enough off was to find the gentleman in America who had bought the vases and then buy them back from him." A cry of delight filled the hall. "I bought them, miei amici, and they are here. They are waiting to be put in their rightful place, in your Museum."

Almost immediately a servant brought in first one urn and then the other. They were placed on a table in full view of the audience. It was the first time that Zita had seen them since she had helped Salvatore to take them away in pig-skins from their cottage. She could not keep back her emotion. Christine tried to screen her, but Salvatore saw her. He was speaking again.

"There is just one thing more I should like to tell you, Onorevoli Signori, miei amici. My sister, your old friend, La Gioconda, took no part in my dishonour; she implored me not to stain our father's name. So whatsoever measure of blame you may bestow on me, remember that La Gioconda is above suspicion. And now I have done, Signori, and I thank you for your patience."

Salvatore sat down. A roar of applause burst as if from one giant voice; it was startling. Sicilian cries of comradeship, affection and admiration poured out one upon another. "Caro Salvatore! Illustrissimo Signore! Onorevole Cavaliere! Amico generoso!"

These cries of affectionate sympathy left little doubt in Salvatore's mind as to his position in the hearts of the people. When the prolonged applause and expressions of welcome had died down, he rose again. His face was almost paler than it had been before, but his eyes were luminous, and his smile youthful and happy.

"Cari amici, concittadini, I thank you, your welcome is almost more than I can bear. I came among you to-night not knowing with what feelings I should leave you. I am leaving you with a heart so full of gladness that emotion robs me of all eloquence. You have shown me that there is no longer a stain on the Casa Salvatore. I know that, in spite of my confession, 'i orfani,'" he smiled, "have still a place in your hearts, that I am forgiven."

"Nostro Salvatore, there's nothing to forgive! Our hearts are full of gratitude! Viva la Casa Salvatore! Viva i orfani."

Salvatore acknowledged the interruption with a happy smile. The audience was listening again; he turned to the Sindaco.

"Onorevoli Signori, will you grant me the privilege of presenting, or rather I should say, returning to the city of Girgenti, these two urns?" He lifted one of the urns in his hands and held it up to the audience. As he placed it on the table again, there was another outburst of applause, which had to be silenced.

The Mayor rose to speak. He accepted the urns quite simply while he shook Salvatore's hand, but the speech which followed was one of those verbose Italian speeches which pour on like a cataract. There is no public speaker more tedious than a pompous Italian.

When at last all the speeches came to an end, and Salvatore had been cheered again and again, there was a sudden cry of: "Where is Zita? We want you, Zita! La Gioconda! Cara bambina!"

Zita at the first sound of her name tried to escape.

"You must go on to the platform," Christine said. "They want you—listen! They will go on until you do."

Zita shrank back still further in her chair. "No, no. I can't speak to them, and I shall only look foolish if I cry. I've been nearly crying all evening. I can't go."

The cries of "Dove e Zita? Dove e la Gioconda?" grew louder and more insistent. She sprang to her feet; their affection gave her courage. Salvatore helped her on to the platform.

For a moment or two she stood quietly looking at the audience, then she kissed her hand and smiled and cried and smiled again. Zita cried adorably; her tears were jewels.

The familiar words: "Carina! Carina bambina! Come e bella! Come e simpatica!" rang through the hall, while other voices demanded: "A speech!"

When the cries of welcome died down Zita tried to make her escape, but that was not allowed. The demand for a speech increased in insistence. So far she had only smiled and said, "Grazie, grazie." She begged Salvatore to say a few words of thanks for her.

"No, no!" he whispered. "Say them yourself—just anything, bambina."

She shook her head. "Tell them that my heart is too full to speak. . . . No wait. . . . Tell them I will sing; say I have never spoken in public."

When Salvatore repeated her words, there was an enthusiastic response. "A song! A song!" came from a hundred lips.

Of course there was a piano on the platform. Zita stood by it for a moment, lost in thought. What song should she sing? Salvatore was to play for her. She whispered to him, "Caro nome."

They all knew that and loved it. As he played over the prelude to "Caro nome" there was a murmur of gratification, and cries of "'Caro nome,' Zita! 'Caro nome,' Zita Mazzini!"

No-one in Girgenti had ever heard "Caro nome" sung as Zita sang it that night. Emotion gave the song a passion and beauty which touched every heart in the hall. It was just like Zita, Christine said to herself, as she listened to the girl's perfectly-trained voice, not to wish to show off her knowledge of good music by singing some song which the townspeople could not have enjoyed. She knew that "Caro nome" would reach every heart.

Zita's judgment had been correct. "Dear name," "Dear name," were the words on every man's and woman's lips, as they elbowed their way out of the hall. " 'Dear name,' Zita Mazzini."

Salvatore was not allowed to walk to his hotel. He was carried shoulder high by the students of the University, while Zita and Christine were placed with much dignity in the old-fashioned barouche which was kept at the expense of the city for the use of the city dignitaries. The Sindaco himself conducted Zita and Christine to their hotel. They were both so tired that they could have cried when they found that the verbose gentleman meant driving in the carriage beside them, but there was nothing to be done but accept the attention gracefully.

. . . .

When at last they were left to themselves and were walking along the corridor to their sitting-room, Zita said apologetically, "If course, I ought to have invited him to come in, Christine. He ought to have drunk our health in Marsala and made a thousand more eloquent speeches." She threw back her head. "Well, I just couldn't! In that respect I have ceased to be a Sicilian. And I never was so tired in my life!"

She was so tired that she even dreaded the intimate conversation which there must be between herself and Christine when they were alone. She was not quite sure how Salvatore's confession had affected Christine's feelings for both her brother and herself. She had been silently sympathetic and charming, but love is capricious. For less reason than

Christine had been given to-night it takes wings and flies off never to return. Friendship comes under more reasonable, less sensitive rule. In fact, we generally know why we like people; why we love them is another matter.

CHAPTER XXIII

When they reached their private sitting-room in the hotel, Zita and Christine threw themselves down in comfortable armchairs. Neither of them spoke; there was too much to say. Their minds both held the same thought.

Although Christine had left her husband years ago she could not help feeling that some of his dishonour clung to her; she still bore his name and until she was legally free from him he was a hidden force in her life.

Zita was wondering if Christine, with her English sense of honour, would understand and forgive Salvatore's one base action. Even now, was she thinking differently of him? Had his brave and honourable speech changed her love for him into a friendship not untouched with pity? As she looked at Christine she said to herself, "Well, at last she knows! At last Salvatore's conscience is free! But will she ever understand what this evening has meant to him?"

Zita was not left very long in doubt, for Salvatore himself appeared before they had spoken to each other. He had got rid of his admiring and noisy companions and had come straight to the sitting-room, to learn from Christine's eyes what her attitude towards him was to be. Had his speech killed the love which he knew she had felt for him in the morning? Had it taught her to distrust him? Would he not for ever now be associated in her mind with her vile husband? They had been companions in guilt.

As he entered the room Christine rose from her chair and slipped out on to the high terrace which overlooks the little farms and the inhabited districts on the slopes of the hills. Zita would like to be alone with her brother for a few minutes. Besides, she too wanted to see Salvatore alone. Zita was a dear, but she was not Salvatore.

Christine stood with her hands clasped before her. She saw nothing, nothing of one of the fairest scenes on earth. She only felt that Salvatore was in the room behind her, and that soon, very soon, he would come and find her.

The shrill whistling of a million frogs did not reach her ears; the lonely cry of screech-owls and the barking of distant dogs were not sounds—they were merely part and parcel of Sicily, the wild and romantic, Sicily which was so intimately a part of her life.

In the room Salvatore had grasped Zita's hands. His eyes spoke to the eager ones which were raised to his.

"She is out there," she whispered, "waiting for you. Go to her."

Salvatore walked noiselessly out to the balcony, but Christine felt his coming. Her one desire was to be ready for him, ready to assure him that if he wished it she was his, to assure him that her love of the morning had become her whole world. She turned at his coming; for one moment their eyes questioned each other.

Then Christine cried: "Salvatore, Salvatore! ecco mi!"

The words were unconsidered. They were an entreaty; he was to come to her; she had been waiting for him. With inviting arms she swam to him through a mist of unreality; the material world had dissolved; they were spirits freed from earthly restrictions.

"Primavera," he said softly, "Primavera mia."

She was in his arms, his breath was on her face. Yet he did not kiss her!

"Ecco mi, Salvatore!" She held her lips up to his.

But he did not take her offered gift. "You know me now," he said, as he held her more closely to him. "You did not believe that I was a thief." He spoke breathlessly.

Christine released her hands from his only to throw her arms around his neck. "Salvatore mio, Salvatore mio, I love you! Oh, how I love you!" Her words ended in a happy sigh. "I think I never could have loved you so much if you had not kept the urns."

"Cara Signora, and I was so ashamed, so afraid." As their lips met he said, "I was so afraid you would think that I too had no honour, that being dishonest in one thing I should be dishonest in other things. You had reason to be afraid."

Christine clung to him reassuringly. She raised her eyes to his. "Do you know that all that you told the people this evening only proved to me how much I loved you? A woman is a silly thing—I wanted them to know that you loved me. I wanted to call it out! I wanted to say, 'I love him, I love him, and your Salvatore loves me.' It was so hard to sit still and say nothing. You looked so pale and anxious, and you only looked at me once for about a second. But it was a lovely second!" The laughter of an infinitely happy woman assured him.

"How can I believe it? Amor mio, donna mia, can life be so wonderful?" He looked up to the heavens. "Can God think me worthy of such love? The stars are not more wonderful than our love, dearest." He raised her face to the sky. "For ten years I have waited for this night! I have dreamed of it! But no dream was ever so sweet as this!" Their lips met again. "Tell me the dear words again, anima mia, my ears love the sound. Say, 'Salvatore, I love you.' "

"My dearest!" she said. "Haven't you heard the song my heart has been singing? For days and days it has been saying unceasingly 'I love you, I love you, I love you!' Salvatore, it has been singing that all day long, but to-night I know that you are my very life and happiness, I belong to you!"

He folded her in his arms. Kisses rained upon her dear lips and passion-closed eyes. "Ti do tutto quanto il mio cuore puo offrire in tenerezze," he murmured, and he said the words even more tenderly in English—"I love your little ear, let me kiss it, let me talk to it just in little whispers, let me tell it all the dear things I have had to say to myself for ten years while the ocean has divided us. Your ear, Primavera, is like a shell, and in our sea-shells there are songs, dear heart, songs which were sung into them thousands of years ago by syrens and dolphins. My love-song will live in your ears when we have ceased to be mortals."

Salvatore said no more. Words were banal with Christine in his arms, so ungrudgingly his. Sicily surrounded them; its unheard melodies were sweeter far.

. . . .

As the town clock struck twelve, Christine's lips received a devout kiss for each stroke.

"Twelve vows went with my kisses," Salvatore said, "and twelve thanks to God for you, beloved." Suddenly he held her from him. "Let me look at you, anima mia."

Christine's laugh was better to Salvatore than a caress.

"Well, you are different now, sposa mia, quite different. Half-an-hour ago I was afraid of your eyes, I was a humble supplicant. Now you are my heart, my eyes, my brain. We are necessary to one another, we are promessi sposi. So much can happen in half-an-hour. When I came to look for you I was afraid that I should be met with kindness mixed with scorn."

"Oh, Salvatore, how could you? If you loved me, how could you think such a thing?"

"Sposa mia," he spoke the words tenderly, "love can make us afraid of almost anything."

She nestled closer to him. "Yes, love can make us believe anything, do anything. It makes the bravest afraid."

"It makes us brave or timid, confident or humble; it makes us twist simple things into mysteries, and for a man, carina, it teaches him that there is no-one good enough for a pure and loving woman."

They stood silently together.

"When a man gains the love of a woman like you, he wishes that he had kept himself more pure and worthy of her gift; it makes him ashamed of his nature in comparison to hers; he hates the memory of his human frailties."

Christine felt her first twinge of guilt. "You are more than worthy, Salvatore." She paused. "Far more worthy. I am . . ." her words lost themselves in a sudden physical weariness.

He held her more protectingly. "No, no," he said. "Never feel afraid any more."

"But you should marry some innocent young girl, whose eyes have not seen and whose ears have not heard what my eyes and ears have seen and heard." Christine's sense of guilt was urging her to confession.

"Mia amatissima," he said gravely, "all that is passed for ever. Nothing of it has stained your soul; your eyes are still the eyes I loved when I first saw you. They are the eyes of the pure in heart." He took her two hands and pressed them to his breast. "I want you to promise, beloved, never to think of the past, never to let it dim one moment of our happiness, never to speak of it. Never let us speak of him. You are to be my wife, you are coming to me as the girl Primavera would have come ten years ago, if God had not seen fit to make us both wait and suffer. Cara Signora," he said passionately, "if you only knew the torture a man endures when he thinks of the woman he loves receiving the caresses of another!"

Christine was crying.

"Anima mia," he said penitently, "you are unhappy! I never meant to cause you that anguish!" As she still wept quietly, he said, "What have I done? What have I done? Look at me, Primavera . . . tell me what I have done."

Christine was trembling. She shook her head. "Not to-night, Salvatore. I will explain another time. To-night I want to take happiness to bed with me; I want only your love." Her self-control had returned; she spoke quietly. "Let us return to Zita and tell her." She laughed happily. "Zita never needs telling, does she?"

Salvatore put his arm round her waist, as they returned to the sitting-room.

"She has gone to bed," Christine said as they entered the deserted room. "Dear little Zita! Wasn't she exquisite to-night? Didn't she sing beautifully?"

Salvatore's free hand went into his pocket. "That reminds me," he said gaily, "I have a note for Zita—it was handed to me as I left the hall."

"From some old admirer who heard her sing, I suppose?"

"Probably he has never seen her before and now he won't stop thinking about her until he has to take unto himself a wife because a man needs a wife and ought to have children of his own—the Sicilian temperament, you will say!"

The note went back into his pocket, where it lay until the next occasion on which he wore his evening clothes.

As they were saying good-night, Christine said, with grave eyes, "I wonder, Salvatore mio, if I shall ever be as happy again? I am afraid to go to bed; it may break the spell. To-morrow always begins new things." She held out her hands; he clasped them eagerly.

"Sposa mia, try to trust me! Try to forget my deception and forgive me!"

"I have nothing to forgive. You are just the same Salvatore whom I instinctively trusted. *He* was just the same man whom I instinctively feared and distrusted. Good-night, beloved. Some day I will tell you the incident which made me lose my distrust of him and made me believe that I had misjudged him."

" No, no," he said emphatically. "Don't tell me anything. Just forget everything. He is dead; we are to speak no more of the dead. I hate remembering him, Signora mia." He wrung her hands, whilst his eyes worshipped her. "Let me forget! Let me forget!"

Christine was silent. She hated herself. She could not promise because she knew the promise could not be kept.

Before she could be Salvatore's wife she must get her divorce. Very soon he must be told everything; but not to-night, not on this wonderful night. After all, her divorce was simply a matter of expense.

CHAPTER XXIV

The next morning was one of Sicily's fairest and gayest. It seemed a happy augury for the lovers, a pleasant approval of Dame Nature.

Christine had not yet joined Salvatore and Zita at breakfast; her early rising in Ischia made her appreciate the luxury of having her prima colazione in her bedroom and dawdling down at whatever hour she pleased. She was just a little bit afraid to begin a new day; she wished to enjoy her happiness for a little longer in a world of her own. In her bedroom she could shut out everything that spoilt the fact that Salvatore loved her, that she was his promised wife.

"He will be telling Zita," she said to herself, as she pressed the violets which he had placed on her breakfast to her lips. How cold they were! How divinely fragrant! "And Zita will be coming up to throw her arms round my neck and ask me when we are to be married!"

. . . .

It was so glorious to lie at rest in her little bed in the vast Sicilian room, where here and there on the floor could be seen remains of Spanish tiles, iridescent and glowing, and doors of elaborate intarsia work, to remind her of the by-gone splendour of the old building; to lie and look coldly at these things while Salvatore's love for her glowed like a great jewel in her soul.

Andrea Zarano had never known this new Christine, this woman who had risen out of the ashes of the one whom he had tried to destroy. He had many times said to her, "If I had married a German woman she would have become a good Hausfrau; if I had married a French woman she would have amused me. But you, you are neither the one nor the other. You will soon discover, however, that your frivolous English ways must cease. You have married an Austrian, a far superior being to any Englishman, and you should be very proud to wait upon him."

"When a woman bores a man," he would say brutally, "it is damnable to have to live with her!"

. . . .

At that moment Zita received a message from the padrona di casa to say that a gentleman was in the salone and would like to see her if she could spare him a few minutes. In Sicily no hour is too early to receive callers.

Salvatore had still so much to tell her that Zita left him reluctantly. She hurried along the terrace, where they had all their meals, and passed into the hotel. When she reached the salone she hesitated for a moment; for the first time she wondered who it was who had come to see her.

She was always daintily dressed and Salvatore's news had made her radiant. She entered the room with smiling lips and eyes alight with triumph. Then she stopped suddenly. Something caught her heart; something familiar and yet unfamiliar was in the room. She could not see who it was. She could only feel, but she was feeling so acutely that she became nervous and grave.

Close to the farthest window in the long room a man was standing, holding a little boy by the hand, a child Raphael, with appealing eyes and a fragile physique. Zita's quick brain took in the child and the man at a glance—the short-comings of the man as a gentleman and his superb qualities as a man, the child's unhealthy beauty. Her soul shrank from her immediate summing-up, for hidden in the man somewhere was the ghost of her old lover, Sardo Fontana.

The man bowed. "Prego, Signorina, have I taken too great a liberty? I heard you sing last night. I could not resist the temptation."

As he looked ardently at her, Zita became very unemotional and hard. This sudden meeting with her old lover had robbed the story for ever of its romance. It was his kid boots and ill-chosen tie of the richest silk. Yet surely these things were unessential? Surely she was not such a snob that these things really mattered?

"I am Sardo Fontana," he said gravely. "Do you remember the day you jumped into my cart from a window at Porto Empedocle?"

Zita held out her two hands. "Bene, bene, and so it is you!" She clasped his hands eagerly; she was anxious to be nice. It was a simple matter for her to be gracious.

"When you sang 'Caro nome' last night the years rolled back. I was a boy again; you were sitting on my cart."

"The song just came to me. I have scarcely sung it since. Girgenti and the people brought it back."

They looked at each other, questioningly. There was so much they wanted to know. While their eyes spoke, their senses were taking in the change which had taken place during the ten years. The simple country girl had been transformed into a fashionably-dressed woman of the world. With his first glance Sardo had recognized that socially Zita was now his superior. What he had not done for himself she had done successfully. He did not know that in his farmer's homespun he had looked much more nearly a gentleman than he did now, in Argentine clothes imported from Germany.

"They tell me you have not married," he said nervously, while his hands caressed his son's bright hair.

"I am an old maid, as they say in England. In America girls do not marry when they are children and when they are women they have such a good time that they don't want to." She tried to laugh. "They have so much freedom."

"In the United States, you mean—not in South America."

"Yes, in New York, where I have lived with my brother."

"In the Argentine, where I live, Signorina, they marry almost as young as they do here."

"Of course you are married, Signor." Zita's eyes fell before his steady gaze. Somehow everything she said seemed to her to show a lack of feeling and forgetfulness. "This is your son?" She stooped down and caressed the gentle child tenderly.

"He is my only child. His mother died when he was an infant."

Zita's senses found relief, her heart bounded. "He married, he forgot me! Why does he assume the air of always having remembered and loved me?" But her super-senses told her that there was nothing assumed or insincere about the man. Whatever impression he conveyed, it was unconsidered and unintentional.

"How beautiful he is," she said gaily; "like a picture of Raphael when he was a little child." She kissed the boy's soft hair.

"Carlito is a good boy." He spoke with melancholy.

"He is not strong?" Her eyes asked the question anxiously.

"I have brought him to the old farm; it is pure mountain air. I hope it will brace him up."

When the subject of the child's health was exhausted Zita searched her mind for something to say. It is not easy to break the silence of memories. Were those memories to be touched upon or were they to be ignored? If they were to be ignored, there seemed nothing else to talk about.

"Your brother, the Cavaliere, is he married, Signorina? He has become a great man; Girgenti is very proud of him."

"I have never shared Salvatore with anyone." She smiled. "But I hope he will marry soon now." A cloud passed over her glowing face. Must she explain that he was going to marry the wife of the man who had behaved so outrageously to her in Porto Empedocle, the man but for whom Sardo would have found sand on her doorstep?

But it was all so long ago. Was it wise to recall it? It really was such a trivial thing now, although it had seemed so important at the time. Very likely he had never thought about her until he had heard her sing "Caro nome" last night. He had loved his wife and probably still loved her memory. For she had given him a son.

Zita argued these things with her senses, while she knew quite well that her song had rekindled the fire of his early romance for herself, that in spite of his marriage he had never forgotten her. There was something about him which impressed her with the fact that their youthful romance had affected his whole life.

"You have been happy in each other, Signorina?" Sardo said. "Do you sing in public? Is it your profession?"

"Sing in public!" She laughed. It was the contagious merry laugh of the girl who had jumped into his cart.

Hot blood rushed through Sardo's veins. He had cherished that laugh, even as he also had striven to forget it. At first he had almost forgotten it in the duties of a young husband and a father and in the life of activity which he led in the Argentine.

"Ma Signorina, why do you laugh? You sang last night as beautifully as any professional singer I have ever heard!"

"It was just a noise," she said provokingly, "just the same noise as I made when you played the reed pipe in your cart."

Her eyes bewildered him.

"Ah, Signorina, you remember?"

"Per certo, I remember. Please sit down, Signor Fontana, for I should like to tell you something." Her eyes changed from gay to grave; her smile faded into reflection. It was better to plunge straight into the memories which filled their thoughts.

Sardo waited for her to seat herself on an absurdly unsociable piece of furniture.

"No, let us try the sofa. It's not much better, but this stool of repentance makes conversation impossible."

"The Albergo is still as it was ten years ago; we can forget the present."

Zita's senses were becoming restive. Was she allowing him to think that she still nursed any sentiment for him? As the minutes had passed she had become more and more aware of her inability to feel one thrill. She felt ashamed.

"Bene! Bene!" he said. His eyes waited for her story.

"Prego, Signor Fontana, I will tell you, but it is difficult to know how to say what I want to."

He smiled. "I shall understand—and, Signorina, I have hungered to know."

Zita's face flushed under his eyes. "I was too young at the time to tell you what had happened and afterwards . . . do you remember?"

"It was yesterday!"

"No, no, Signor, I am a woman now. I am twenty-seven; in Sicily I should be an elderly woman."

"You were a child-woman, Signorina. I called you 'Madonnina,' 'Mogliettina' (little wife)." He said the last words almost inaudibly.

"I had behaved like a child, Signor Fontana. I went with Count Zarano in his automobile to the Port. He had told me that I should meet my brother there, that Salvatore had told me to come with him; I went because I wanted the drive and I believed that Salvatore would be there. Dio mio! How I enjoyed the drive! I remember every bit of the journey." She paused. "When I got to the Port, of course there was no Salvatore. If I had not been such a child, I should have known."

Sardo dared not raise his eyes to Zita's burning face.

"When we arrived at the Port he took me into an inn and offered me some wine and fruit. He . . ." she paused, and then said hurriedly, "Need I tell you that he wanted to make love to me?"

Still Sardo did not look at her.

"He made a pretence of going to look for Salvatore. He locked me in the room, so I determined to jump out of the window. You were passing." Zita held out her hands. "You saved me, Signor Fontana, and I have never forgotten that drive and your kindness."

"And after, Signorina? Tell me. I went happily and confidently to your house; there was no sand on your doorstep." His eyes questioned her. "I was young, I was mad with disappointment. I looked through your keyhole to see if you had returned, and I saw . . ."—he threw back his head—"I saw Hell, Signorina."

"You looked through the keyhole? You . . . you . . ." Her voice faltered; she stared at him in amazement.

"Yes, Signorina. I hoped that you had not returned, that something had . . ."

Zita interrupted him. "He was with me; he had come to take his revenge. I was alone with him. Santa Virgine! Why did you not come in? Why did you not try to save me a second time?"

"If I had, Signorina . . . ?" Her eyes pleaded for an answer.

"If he had," Zita said to herself, "I should now be his wife!" It seemed impossible and yet it was the truth.

"Jealousy turned my brain, Signorina; I thought he was your lover; you were in his arms. Was I to blame?"

"Listen," Zita said earnestly. "He was never my lover. At first his attentions and refined manners flattered and pleased me, but when I learnt their true meaning I hated him. When you looked through the keyhole I was terrified; it did not seem as if even the Blessed Virgin could save me from such a villain."

"I thought that you had deceived me, that he was your lover! All these years I have nursed that evil in my heart."

"Very soon after that he married the girl whom my brother is engaged to now. How strangely the moving finger writes!" Zita's face brightened. "Salvatore is a Mazzini—he has waited!"

"Your brother is going to marry the wife of Count Zarano?" Sardo's eyes expressed something more than surprise.

"Yes. Why not?" Zita spoke quickly. "They became engaged last night after we left the hall. She is wonderful. But her husband was no Count—everything about him was a lie! He was . . ."

Sardo interrupted her. "You say 'was,' Signorina—is he dead?" He asked the words hesitatingly; he looked surprised.

"She has been a widow for many years."

"Ah, that is good." His voice expressed relief and satisfaction.

"You looked surprised."

"I have been misinformed, that is all." He shook his head. "It is a mistake."

"She promised to marry my brother last night. You heard his speech?" Zita's eyes looked proudly into her companion's face.

"A brave splendid speech! I know who the villain was who induced him to keep the urns; I understood the whole story. But I never until now knew why you had, as I thought, so cruelly deceived me. When I fled from your door, Signorina, I determined to find out all about your lover. No, no, let me speak! I know better now, but I was young and I adored you; every breath in my body was for you. You were sacred to me, until I saw you in your lover's arms!"

Zita's hands covered her face. The man at her side had faded away. The youthful Apollo with the golden-brown hair and the laughing eyes was standing at her door looking for the sand; he was kneeling, with eyes straining through the keyhole; he was cursing her in his heart for her treachery. She dropped her hands and looked at him questioningly. What was the new Sardo really like? In his voice there was only a thin note of the old Sicilian youth. There was so little in the prosperous merchant to remind her of the Apollo who had piped while she sang!

He continued his story. "When I turned away from your door, Signorina, I thought I hated you and I cursed the man; I vowed that I would find out all I could about him, that I would kill him. I am not a Mazzini, Signorina, but I am a Sicilian, and I too can wait!" He paused, and their eyes met. The old longing for revenge had leapt into life in the man.

In the big room the movement of a fly could have been heard, while the girl sat with her hands folded lightly in her lap. She was thinking rapidly: "If he had known, what would have happened? If he had killed the Count, would Primavera ever have married Salvatore?" If the man at her side had come to her aid a second time this story need not have been written.

Zita raised her head. In her heart she was thankful that he had not trusted her. "You were not to blame. I knew you found no sand, but if I had known that you had seen us together in the cottage, I think I should have died of shame." She sighed. "A strange thing happened—God sent Salvatore home early that night." Her eyes said the rest.

Sardo rose hastily from his seat. "And he did not kill him?"

"There was Christine! Salvatore had learnt that she loved him. But for that I think he would have killed him. And I was so afraid that he would kill him—or rather, try to," Zita said hurriedly, "for the Count was a deadly shot—that I never told Salvatore that 'il Signore,' as I called him, had driven me to the Port. My brother thought that that was the first time that he had insulted me." She gave a tired sigh. "What was the use of telling him? What good would it have done? Salvatore was all I had in the world . . . if I had lost him?" She threw back her head. "Salvatore had to think of that—there was no-one to look after me if he were killed. I orfani had to cling together."

"Corpo di Bacco! And you say the man is dead? I am deprived of a pleasant business? I would have searched the world for him!"

"Amico mio, it is all over now," Zita said. "Now that you understand, it is absolutely all over and done with. I have always longed to let you know that I . . ." She hesitated, and then went on hurriedly. "Now all I really want is to see Salvatore happily married. 'La Primavera,' as we call her, has become quite Italian, Italian enough to understand an Italian husband." She smiled whimsically. "But as for that, Salvatore is now only half Italian; he is even less Sicilian than you are, Signor Fontana."

"He is cosmopolitan. I have lived in the Argentine. Life there is more like life in Italy." He spoke sadly. "I orfani have become citizens of the world; I am, as many people think, a good Sicilian spoilt."

"You are my old friend!" Zita spoke impulsively, almost affectionately, but without passion. Their long and intimate talk had made her feel much more at her ease.

With Sardo it was not so. He was in love with her again and each fresh revelation of her beauty and charm as a woman made him feel less at ease. The very fact that she could speak so frankly of her girlish feeling for him told him that their meeting had not done for her what it had done for him. To a lover Friendship tolls the knell of Romance.

"Prego, tell me, Signorina, tell me this one thing . . ."

"Tell you what?" His despondent looks made Zita flippant.

"If the Count had not been with you, if he had not come that evening . . . ? You can tell me that now, Signorina—I deserve to know the whole story."

Zita's great eyes looked unflinchingly into his. She felt cruelly unthrilled and critical. She had not wished to notice the all absurd little things which proclaimed the man to be her social inferior; she despised herself for feeling and seeing them; they were not the essentials about the man—they merely showed that by chance he had absorbed the manners and customs of a civilisation which did not fall in with her ideas of good form. He was not what the cultivated and intellectual world calls a gentleman.

She called herself a snob for feeling these things, and yet it was these little things which made it possible for her to return his gaze without one quicker movement of the heart, without one responsive throb of her senses.

"Would there have been any sand, Signorina?" He sighed. "It can do no harm to tell me that now."

Still Zita's eyes did not flinch or her senses respond to his, as she said thoughtfully, "Of course, amico mio, there would have been sand. I was no coquette. You were my hero. Why do these things happen? Life is a strange problem. Was it because I was too young to understand that Providence intervened?" She smiled. "I was very ignorant and very romantic. You had a lucky escape, Signor. For three nights I sprinkled my doorstep with fresh sand; I tried to persuade myself that something had detained you, that you would come another night." She shook her head. "Che sara sara—we are so helpless."

"Ah, Signorina, if I had only known! I fled to the Argentine, and from that day I hated my own country. It is the destruction of ideals that kills youth. I believed that all girls were false; I tried to look upon women as . . ." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Amico mio!"

"Love can be pitiless; it can be an agony to youth. It was unkind to me; I became a different man."

"You have been happy, Signor?" Zita caressed the bright head of the child at her feet. Carlito was playing with a box of delicately-coloured shells which he had discovered in a cabinet. "We were both romantic, Signor, and very Sicilian. Sometimes I can scarcely believe that I am the same girl, that I could ever have thought of marrying a man whom I had only spoken to once. America has made me more cautious." Her eyes became thoughtful. "But there is plenty of love there, Signor, if there is not so much romance. Now, if you had met me in New York, I should have invited you to my house." Her eyes smiled. "There is no singing under balconies, no need to throw sand on doorsteps! Men and women can meet openly and become lovers."

"Sicily is not progressive, Signorina. The outward signs of change mean very little; the home lives of the people are just where they were centuries ago. Sicilians do not change."

"I don't want them to change. Do you?"

"Change, Signorina, should come from within. To copy other countries is a mistake; it is not true progress; it is sacrificing culture for a parvenu civilisation. And after all," he sad hotly, "Italy civilised Europe; we need not begin to copy!"

Zita had had no idea how much she herself had changed until this morning. In the old days she would never have thought about all the things which jarred upon her now. She was shocked to find herself coldly critical about the smallest details of Sardo's personality. Long ago, as a well-to-do Sicilian farmer, he had seemed to her not only remarkably handsome, but "ben allevato" (well-bred). She wondered if she really was a snob. When she questioned herself, she felt comforted with the reflection that if he had to-day jumped off his cart, in his country clothes, she would not have felt as she did now; she would have felt the difference between them less.

And why on earth did he dress his boy on a warm summer day in an azure blue plush suit with a Vandyke collar of imitation lace? These things were, she knew, trivial, but they were idiotically annoying to her nerves. And yet, as she looked at him, there was no denying the fact that her youthful Apollo had developed into a fine specimen of manhood.

The longer they talked together the more Zita felt at her ease, because she saw all these things very clearly. She knew that nothing could ever revive the old romance. She had cleared her name and explained the tragedy to Sardo, but the sad thing was how terribly little it mattered now. Long ago, during her lonely and poverty-stricken life in Rome, she had longed to see him again and explain everything to him. Now that he knew it seemed of ridiculously little account. How could she have cared so much? In America she had looked back upon the episode as very old-world and intensely Sicilian; and yet it always wounded her sensibilities when she thought of how the man who had saved her must have blamed and despised her.

With the prosperity of later years her life had been lived quickly and fully; only occasionally she had thought tenderly of her broken idyll, her Sicilian lover. America had taught her that all romantic episodes need not end in marriage.

Sitting by his side, she visualised herself as the busy wife of a Sicilian farmer. The fashionable world to which she now belonged would never have existed for her; Sardo would never have gone to the Argentine if she had sprinkled sand on her doorstep.

As for Sardo, while she was thinking these things and saying conventional ones, he was asking himself how the girl had achieved such distinction. No Sicilian aristocrat had a finer air of breeding or more gracious manners. In the old days he knew that in offering Zita Mazzini his hand he was from a material point of view a very good match for a poor girl. To-day he knew that she was socially his superior. Sicilians never mistake the "real thing." Zita was no mere copy of a refined gentlewoman; she was one. He realised the fact and it made him despondent.

There was another thing which angered him. The man who had robbed him of the jewel of life, was dead. If only he had been alive he would have found some satisfaction and outlet for his feelings in killing him. By the time he rose to say good-bye he was as much in love with Zita as he had been when he lifted her to the ground from the shaft of his cart.

"Addio, Signor," Zita said. "But it must not be for long—we shall soon meet again, and this time," she smiled, "I shall not be afraid to introduce you to Salvatore. He will be delighted to meet you."

"No, you will not be afraid, Signorina." He said the words regretfully. "You will not be afraid."

Zita's eyes remained friendly and sincere. "I am glad I sang the old song—old friends are true friends."

Sardo's face was grave. "You have many friends and must have much to do. You have been very unkind to spare me so much time. Addio."

"Per certo, I have much to do, amico mio, but nothing more pleasant than to talk to you."

"You are returning to America, Signorina?"

Zita shook her head. "Our plans are uncertain—my brother's marriage may change them. I will let you know." She thought for a moment. "No—please come again on Sunday evening. I would ask you to dine with us," she shrugged her shoulders, "but you will do better at home." Their eyes met. Zita laughed gaily. "In the old days I should have considered it a great treat to dine here. Ah, Signor, how soon luxury spoils our appetites! Salvatore says I grumble if my coffee is not Mocha. Do you know, every night our dinner here costs us more than we had to live on for a month in Casa Salvatore!" She laughed. "Salvatore is not spoilt—he will eat anything rather than give trouble."

"You are not spoilt, Signorina, only critical. At heart you are just the same. Good Sicilians never change."

"I have a sense of humour, amico mio—I think that has saved me. Without it I might have become very stuck-up and snobbish; I might have tried to make the dear people here forget the poor Zita of long ago."

"You are too clever and wise to be spoilt, Signorina."

"You may call it clever, if you like, Signor, but the truth is that from someone, I don't know from whom, I inherited a fine bump of commonsense and a sane judgment of the value of things. My brother's promised wife is Scots. Ma! Signor, the climate has changed her—she is now more Italian than I am." She stooped and took Carlito in her arms. "He is adorable, Signor Fontana. Aren't you very proud of him?"

Sardo Fontana's eyes filled with tears.

"Addio, addio," Zita said quickly. His tears told her that the child's days were numbered. "Come on Sunday evening and we will drink coffee on the terrazza, and I will sing for you."

"Not 'Caro nome' this time, Signorina."

"No, not 'Caro nome.'" She paused; their eyes met again. "Amico mio, I don't think I shall ever sing 'Caro nome' again." She did not add what she felt was the truth—that her meeting with him had robbed it of its romance.

Sardo Fontana took his son by the hand and walked to the door. As he opened it he said again, "Addio, addio, Signorina, e grazie."

When she was left alone, Zita stood looking out on to the terrace, her hands clasped tightly together, her eyes searching the distance. 'Twixt sea and hills stood temples whose gods still frolic with the passions of men. Lying out in the sea was the port where she had first become the victim of their caprice. What further use had they for her, she wondered? Her thoughts travelled to New York.

The clock struck twelve. "Mezzo giorno!" she said to herself. "Is it as late as that?" Her hands fell to her side, her eyes left the distance. "Poor Sardo, poor man!" she spoke tenderly. "Why did I sing 'Caro nome'? Why are we made like this? Why did I not care one scrap? The only thing I cared about was that he should not care. My business now must be to show him that it is no use, that every bit of the old feeling is dead, completely dead, dead and buried." She sighed. In her heart she knew quite well that from the first moment that Sardo had betrayed his feelings for her she had realised the depth of her own for the man in New York who was waiting for her. She roused herself.

"But I must go and see Primavera. She will be waiting for my coming; she will think me unkind, if she does not know that Sardo was here." She hurried to Christine's bedroom.

CHAPTER XXV

The moment she opened the door Christine called out, "Is that you at last, Zita mia? Do come in."

"Yes, it is Zita, cara sorella, cara sorellina." She put her arms round Christine. "It is so nice to know that you are really my sister. Isn't it all like a story-book?"

"I have been longing for you," Christine said. "But what is the matter? Why so grave?"

"Something has happened, but I want to speak to you about Salvatore." Zita became silent.

Christine's nerves were instantly agog. Had she discovered?

"What has happened worthy of that grave face, you tragic little Sicilian?" She managed to speak flippantly.

"I have seen Sardo Fontana—you know, the man I once should have married. And now I don't know how I could, just because he wears kid boots and the wrong sort of clothes and lets his polished nails grow too long. Oh, Primavera, I hate myself! I hate human nature!" The girl's head went down on Christine's shoulder.

Christine laughed heartily; it was the best thing she could have done.

"Don't laugh, Primavera! It is no laughing matter—he cares, he is in love with me all over again. . . . You know . . . he will suffer!"

"And you don't care for him because he wears American kid boots, poor man! Zita mia, but you are delicious!"

"I am a worthless cat. I am not delicious—how can you say so?"

"You are a very human woman. And don't be tragically idiotic! You have changed and he has not, that's all—it's perfectly natural."

"But he has changed! That's just it. Long ago he was a simple Sicilian; there was nothing about his manner or appearance which even you would object to. But now . . . well . . . he is simply neither one thing nor the other—he is neither an American gentleman nor a Sicilian farmer." She paused. "And his little boy—a perfect angel-child—was dressed, poor little thing, in azure blue plush! Just imagine plush in this weather!"

"Oh, he is married, is he? Then why all this tragedy?" Christine shook the serious girl. "What does it matter if you don't care? He got over it—as the saying is, he forgot you and took unto himself another woman."

"He is a widower."

"But he loved someone else."

"Non mai, Primavera. I could feel that, I knew it."

"Then why did he marry her?"

Zita threw back her head. "Why does half of the world marry? Because home life is necessary, because a man wants sons, because a woman wants someone to keep her—ecco, you have it!"

"Did he tell you all that?"

"No, no." Zita sighed. "But let us talk of your happiness. You have promised Salvatore? You are to be my real sister? When can you marry him?"

Christine smiled. "Yes, I have promised. And you are glad? You really won't grudge me Salvatore?"

"It makes me so happy, carina. It is just like a beautiful story-book. I was right. I thought you loved him; I did not see why he should have been so afraid to tell you."

Christine interrupted her. "He was afraid to tell me, Zita, because it was my husband who tempted him and he wouldn't ask me to love him until I knew all about it." She stopped.

Zita grasped her hands. "Ah," she said, "it is such a great mercy he is dead and that the good God has been his judge, for if he were alive to-day Sardo Fontana would find him; he would not rest until he had killed him."

Christine's heart seemed suddenly to fill her throat; an awful blackness swam before her eyes. But she managed to speak without showing her emotion. "But why Sardo Fontana?" she said. "What had he to do with Andrea?" Her eyes questioned the girl anxiously.

"Sardo suffered too through his wickedness. I never meant to tell you—don't let us speak of it."

"Zita, tell me, did you ever love my husband? Did he make love to you? You can't hurt me—always there was some other woman. Don't be afraid to speak."

Zita raised burning cheeks and eyes to meet Christine's. "Don't ask me, Primavera. It was all so ugly, so ordinary. Please, I would rather not think of it. I never need think of it again, now that Sardo knows; I explained the whole thing to him this morning."

"Yes, I understand. But tell me, I must know—what had Andrea to do with your broken romance?"

Zita bowed her head. "He had everything to do with it. When Sardo Fontana came to our house on the evening when I was to give him my answer, he saw me in your husband's arms; he had come to our house. . . ." Zita stopped. The words were hideous, the story vulgar.

"Did you love him? Was he courting you even while he was engaged to me? Was he false to me even then?"

"I never loved him. I was afraid of him. But he tried to make me love him; I think before he wanted you he tried to make me his mistress. But I tricked him and outwitted him, and then when I warned him that I would tell you everything, that I would allow you to judge what sort of a man he was, he hated me. He longed to take his revenge. Soon after that you married him and left the island."

"He was very anxious that I should engage you as my maid; he often urged me to suggest the idea to you." Christine's voice was cold and even. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"He came to our house when Salvatore was out, when he knew that I should be alone. It was the very hour that Sardo Fontana had appointed. Some sand on our doorstep was to be my silent token that I wished to accept his addresses. If the sand was there he was to come again to see Salvatore. Cara mia, how long ago it all seems! Poor Sardo, he saw no sand! He hoped that perhaps I had not returned from the farm—he knew I went there. He thought I might have been detained, so he peeped through the keyhole." Zita paused. How could she tell the miserable truth?

Christine laughed mirthlessly and yet spontaneously. "How Sicilian—peeping through the keyhole!"

"It was only to comfort himself with the assurance that I was still down at the temple with my brother, that the cottage was empty."

"Well? Go on."

Zita spoke in a whisper. "He saw me in your husband's arms. And if he were alive to-day Sardo would kill him. He is still a Sicilian."

Christine was silent. Her heart seemed bursting. The girl's words had suddenly filled her world with tragedy. If she told Zita that her husband was alive Sardo Fontana would hear of it. She hated her husband, but she could not contemplate his murder. Her firm determination of an hour ago to tell both Zita and Salvatore that he was alive had suddenly been made impossible. She must take time to consider what was the wisest thing to do. At present the only course was to keep silent.

Zita saw her agony. "God is good, sorella mia. Sardo need not kill anyone." She smiled happily. "And perhaps you would never have loved Salvatore if all this had not happened. Dio mio! When I think of it, of course you wouldn't! Socially we were poles apart. Cara mia, in those days it was 'lei,' not 'voi' or the more familiar 'tu.' "

"I always thought of Salvatore as intellectually my superior."

"I believe you, for Salvatore had an individuality which even in those days made him different. When I think back upon it all, the life we led was quite refined and cultivated, even if we were very poor." She stopped. "There is Salvatore—listen! He is impatient, poor boy. It is almost lunch-time."

In answer to his knock at her door Christine called out "Avanti!"

Salvatore entered the room eagerly. "I couldn't wait any longer; what have you both been doing?" His arms encircled them as he held them both in a tight embrace. "Sposa mia, sorella mia," he said gaily, "a man can hold his entire world in his arms!"

CHAPTER XXVI

While they were at Girgenti a visit was to be paid to Salvatore's bottega at Licata, the ancient Gela. Salvatore had settled his bottega there because Licata lies at the mouth of the river Salso. His earthenware pottery required the special earth or clay which is brought down by that river in torrential seasons.

. . . .

The bottega had been visited. There was such a pleasant atmosphere of enthusiasm and refinement about the small industry that it carried Christine's mind back to the accounts which she had read of the famous Fontana family and their bottega at Urbino. And surely no Castel Durante ware was more beautiful than the Mazzini ware at Licata? Every process of the work was interesting, from the mixing of the earth or clay to the painting of the articles by artists who were inspired with a desire and an ambition to turn out of the bottega as fine work as the Gubbio ware of the sixteenth century.

Long ago Salvatore had discovered that his industry was an expensive hobby. He soon realised the fact that Maestro Giorgio could never have produced the articles of immortal beauty which he made in his bottega at Gubbio but for the wealth and encouragement of the great Italian house which financed him.

When they had inspected the bottega Salvatore asked Zita if she would celebrate the occasion of their visit by presenting his employees with some memento. Zita, who was nothing if she was not human and understanding, said she would if Salvatore would go and do a little sightseeing with Christine. Dear as she knew she was to her brother, she also knew that he appreciated her skilful handling of chaperonage.

Salvatore and Christine were wandering over classic ground. When they were tired they seated themselves within sight of the home of the brazen bull. They were lovers, so their interest in Licata Majolica and the horrors perpetrated by Acragas soon drifted into a more personal channel.

Salvatore spoke of their marriage. Had she decided yet when it was to be? Couldn't they fix the date?

Christine's nerves were on fire. "Dearest," she said, "we have only been engaged two days and it is so lovely—is there any need for hurry?"

Salvatore's long fingers clasped her ankle, which had restlessly been moving about while her toe turned over the white stones which covered the ground. They were seated on large flat stones near the dry river bed.

"Hurry! Donna mia, do you call ten years hurrying?" He spoke accusingly.

"It is hurried since. . . ."

"Since you said you loved me? Well, go on—say it, beloved! The words are more wonderful each time I hear them!"

"Well, since I said I love you." She smiled. "Don't let's hurry over all the niceness too quickly. Each bit of our love is so heavenly."

He laughed delightedly. "You darling, are you so happy?"

By way of answer Christine kissed his shoulder and rubbed her cheek against his coat, of indestructible Sicilian frieze.

"Dear, dear man," she said as she pressed her shoulder more closely to his, "you dearest thing in the world, I want to enjoy my engagement and my honeymoon and just everything! Don't let's hurry." There was a note of anxiety and sadness in her voice. To Salvatore it suggested that to hasten their marriage might break the spell of their happiness.

"You are sad, Christine. I hear apprehension in your voice. Precious woman, is it because you are afraid to be happy?" His eyes questioned her.

"I don't know. If I'm sad it is only because to me happiness such as ours seems dangerous. We have reached the point when something must happen—we are only mortals."

"That is due to nerves, donna mia. You are in need of rest; I must take better care of you."

She held up a smiling face to his. "Perhaps it's just a kiss I want." Her gaiety was all assumed. "Remember, I haven't had one all day."

Salvatore took her face in his two hands. When their clinging lips parted they looked round with a guilty air of lovers who have been stealing kisses in a public place.

"No, no! No-one was looking!" Salvatore said boyishly.

But he spoke without having looked. Christine had looked and she had seen a figure suddenly stoop to a crouching position in the river, which was practically dry.

"There is a man in the river bed," she said. His crouching attitude preyed on her nerves. "I wonder what he is doing? He seemed to be hiding for some reason or other."

"I don't know and I don't care, beloved, so long as he doesn't come this way. But tell me, diletta mia, how much longer am I to wait? It's lovely being engaged, but it will be a thousand times lovelier being married."

"Don't ask me to tell you until we leave Sicily! Don't, darling! Just let things be as they are until we go back to Ischia." Christine raised pleading eyes.

"A whole week?" he said woefully.

"Only a week," Christine said regretfully, "only one more week of perfect delight and happiness."

"But don't you want to marry me?"

"More than anything in the world."

"Then why wait one hour more than we need?"

"Because we can never be engaged again and it is so heavenly. Being engaged is like the feeling of spring, with all its promise of the summer before one."

"You darling!" he said. "When you put it like that I must be content to wait. But would you believe it?—since we've been engaged I seem to have waited for years and years."

"Dear silly thing!"

"Isn't it splendid being silly, sposa mia?"

Christine's eyes did not meet his. He felt that her thoughts had left him; she was sitting like a pillar of salt by his side. He spoke to her teasingly.

"Come back, Signora. I'm jealous of your thoughts."

Still Christine made no response.

He caught hold of her. She was trembling; her face was ashen. "Donna mia, donna mia, what have I done?" He rolled himself over on the stones until he could see her averted face. "What have I done, Primavera? Why do you look like that?"

When Christine tried to speak her lips only trembled; she shook her head. If only he would leave her! If only he would go away! She wanted to bury her face in the ground and cry until her aching heart burst; she wanted to hide herself somewhere, to escape, to get away. But Salvatore did not leave her. He held her in his arms and kissed her with all the terrified tenderness of a lover who easily exaggerates anything that affects the health of his beloved.

Christine struggled for self-control. "Could you dip my hankie in the river, dearest? It might cool my head."

She offered him her handkerchief. He refused it and took instead the napkin which had covered their tea things; it would keep longer wet and go better round her forehead. Salvatore was almost distracted. Moisture formed in drops on his forehead as he dashed off to the river to do her bidding.

The moment Salvatore's back was turned Christine looked round with terrified eyes. She scanned the rocky ground in front of her. The figure which she had seen crouching in the river bed had crept closer to them. Now it was kneeling behind a rock. She had watched its stealthy movements, for almost from the first she had recognized the man. He was her husband.

Andrea Zarano was watching Salvatore! He had of course seen all that had taken place between them. Christine crouched to the earth. What should she do? What was her husband going to do? Would he follow Salvatore and spring on him, or was he just spying on them for the satisfaction of discovering that they were lovers?

Salvatore had reached the little trickle of water in the wide river bed; he was stooping down to wet the napkin. Her husband was still watching him from behind the rock. He was twice as far from Salvatore as he was from Christine and there was very rugged ground in between the two men. She was too terrified to move, and yet she knew that she ought to do something and that something quickly.

The instant Salvatore turned his back on the river with the wet cloth in his hand, her husband left his hiding-place. He was stealthily picking his way over the loose stones to where she was sitting. Her heart stood still; fear paralysed her. The two men must meet. Nothing she could do could prevent that now. Probably her husband was armed and well prepared for the meeting. He must have followed them from Licata.

Salvatore waved his hand to Christine. In his anxiety he paid no attention to the man who was ahead of him. As the man quickened his pace, however, and drew closer to Christine he became annoyed. Then, to his surprise and horror, he saw him lay his hand on Christine and Christine's head go down to the ground. With her hands she was digging amongst the stones like an animal seeking covert.

Mad with rage, Salvatore leapt forward. He was at her side in a moment. Christine's obvious terror had brought a yell of rage from him like the roar of a bull.

"Take your hands off!" he shouted. "If you don't I'll kill you!"

Christine made no movement. She dared not face the meeting of the two men. She knew that at any minute Salvatore must recognize her husband. Still grovelling in the loose stones she crouched closer to the ground. She could not and would not see what she knew must happen. The desolate world was waiting for death—it was coming.

For a moment the world was still silent; its desolation fed no living thing. Then suddenly a horrible choking gasp, a throat-gurgle and the hard crunching of feet on the loose stones, made her spring to her feet. The sound was ominous, but not what she had expected. No revolver shot had rung out in the clear air.

What she saw when she raised her head was her husband with the wet napkin which was to have eased her head twisted tightly round his throat. Salvatore was twisting it tighter and tighter, while his victim's face was getting redder and redder.

Andrea Zarano had paid no attention to Salvatore's roar of anger, so the throttling was swift and effectual. From behind the napkin had gone over his head with the quickness and sureness of Salvatore's unerring eye and hands. The Count had no time to even attempt to free himself.

His face was quickly turning from deep red to a dull purple and his eyes seemed to be bursting out of their sockets. The sight was so horrible that it brought a cry from Christine's lips.

"Salvatore! Salvatore! Leave him! You are killing him! For heaven's sake let go the napkin! Oh God!" she said. "How horrible!"

At the sound of her voice Salvatore looked suspiciously at her. His habitually gentle expression had changed to one of vengeance and cruelty.

Christine gazed at him in terror. He was quite capable in his present state of killing the man who was so completely in his power. The Count had ruined her young life and he was going to ruin it again, but his staring eyes, which looked as if blood might at any moment spurt from them, sickened her.

Not a word had been spoken until Christine's cry tore through the air. The tragedy had been enacted in silence. It was tense, dramatic and typically Sicilian. Salvatore had only recognised the Count as the noose went round his neck.

Christine's cry had not made him loosen the napkin. Indeed, since he had looked at her, he seemed more determined than ever to kill the man. She sprang to his side and tried to catch hold of his hands, but Salvatore was too quick for her.

"He is better dead! Leave him to me."

"No, no! Don't kill him!" she shrieked. "Look! look! His face is almost black! Oh, Salvatore, leave him! For my sake, don't kill him! He is my husband."

Instantly Salvatore's grip slackened. He allowed the man a little mercy. As he slackened the napkin his eyes sought Christine's. In them she saw a new agony.

"If I let him go, it is because you love him." As he spoke, his fingers twisted the napkin back again into the old creases.

Christine felt as if she were going mad. In the blinding sunlight against a background of white stones the two men were hideously distinct, though both of their faces were scarcely recognisable. If she did not tell Salvatore that she loved her husband, he would kill him. Salvatore would be a murderer. Often she had wished Andrea dead, and never oftener than within the last few days, but Salvatore must not kill him. She could never marry the man who had killed him.

Salvatore waited for her answer. The only sound was the crunching of the men's feet on the stones. Water was beginning to ooze up and wet the snow-white gravel and sand. The Count had no breath left for groans.

As Salvatore spoke his eyes lashed her with scorn. "If you love him," he said, "if you ask me for his life, it is yours, I will give it to you."

"Answer me," he said. His eyes seemed to have forgotten his love for her. He was no longer the Salvatore who had caressed her a few moments before. "Do you love him?" he repeated harshly.

"Yes, I love him," she said firmly. "Give me his life."

A roar of human agony went up to the cloudless sky. The Count was free and Salvatore Mazzini was rushing wildly and heedlessly from the man and woman, who were left alone on an ocean of white stones.

As Salvatore's cry filled the desolate landscape, it told Christine what her words had done to him. They had committed murder. They had done a far more cruel deed than the killing of a worthless man. It was the cry of a hopeless soul that had gone out into the wilderness.

CHAPTER XXVII

When Andrea Zarano recovered from the effects of Salvatore's throttling, with some assumption of the old playfulness which he had adopted towards Christine in the first days of their married life, he said to her:

"So my wife still loves me, she is glad to return to her Andrea!"

He saw Christine shrink from him; every nerve in her body was strung to a cruel pitch of agony. Why had Salvatore deserted her? Why had he not known that she had only said that she loved her husband to save him from murder?

"Your lover has left you," the man said. "He won't return."

As he spoke he came closer to Christine and held out his hands.

"So my little Christine is coming back to her husband, her Andrea, who was always willing to forgive her?" He tried to embrace her. She was the beautiful woman he had imagined matrimony would make her.

"Don't touch me!" Christine said. "Don't ever dare to touch me!"

"But you love me—what's the matter?" He laughed cynically.

"You know I hate you! I would rather kill myself than go back to you! Keep your hands off!"

"Was that your sly way of getting rid of him, your parvenu lover? Are you tired of him? May I know his rival? This is very amusing."

"Oh, you beast and coward, can't you even be grateful? To save yours, I have spoilt my life. I saved you and yet you dare to speak to me like that!"

"Why did you do it?" he said softly. The voice was gentle.

Christine was superb in her anger; she was well worth wooing all over again.

"Why did you ask for my life if you did not want me?" he asked with well-assumed sincerity. "Come, let us forget, let us begin all over again. I will forgive your infidelity because I want you. I have always wanted you." He held out his arms. "Fill them, sposa mia, and be a loving and forgiving little wife."

Christine sprang from him. She knew every phase of the man's character. "I begged for your life," she said, "because I love Salvatore. If anyone else would kill you I should thank God! I would kill you myself if it would not kill him too."

"Pretty spitfire!" he said mockingly. "You have more passion in your little finger than the old Christine had in her whole body. Now you are worth a man's fidelity." He moved closer to her. "You must give me what you never gave me before and we will be lovers again."

Christine looked all round. She was terrified. The place was utterly deserted. She must get back to Licata, she must somehow get away from him. She knew only too well what he was like when his passions were roused, when a woman was desirable in his eyes.

The tragedy had been enacted in less than a quarter of an hour, but already it had distanced her by years from Salvatore, whose devotion comprised her world. Now, although the napkin which he had dipped in the river was not yet dry, he was infinitely far away; he was rushing blindly and madly through Hades. He had left her to go with her husband, whose neck was still scarred with the marks of his strangling.

These thoughts rushed wildly through her mind as she turned to the man at her side, whose impertinent demands maddened her. But she must ignore his requests. It did her credit that she was able to say with perfect self-composure:

"You know what a Sicilian is capable of doing to avenge his sister's honour and to save the woman he loves. If I had not lied to Salvatore and told him that I still loved you, he would have killed you—is that not perfectly true?"

"Your lover was always a primitive where a woman came into the question; he is little better than a savage. What can you expect?"

"Never mind what he is," Christine said quietly. "He would have killed you, and according to his Sicilian code of honour he would have been justified. It would not have been murder. By lying to him and breaking his heart, I have saved your life. Now I ask you, for once be fair to me. Will you do one deed for which I can thank you?"

He bowed mockingly. "I am only a poor archæologist—my work is at Licata. I cannot help you financially—I am no millionaire."

Christine kept her temper. "Will you let me return alone to Licata? You have robbed me of my lover"—she used the word deliberately. "I am absolutely penniless. To force me to come back to you would be madness."

He looked at her plain gown and her unjewelled hands. "Your lover has not spent many of his American dollars on his mistress; as my wife you were better dressed."

Christine's face burned and her eyes blazed, but she held her tongue; it was worth while. "I have never willingly harmed you and to-day I have saved your life. Will you let me go?"

The Count was silent. The woman was very desirable; she was his wife. But he realised that if she shrank from him it would be the old story over again. He had no wish to support a grudging woman. The woman with whom he was living at present was rich and goodnatured. She was ignorant, but she had tact enough not to bore him, and her Levantine type of beauty had not yet developed into grossness. He of course never doubted that Christine was living with Salvatore. It was her passion for him which had beautified her and made her what he himself had failed to make of her. It gave him a keen satisfaction to know that he had separated them.

"As I have no wish to live with a reluctant wife," he said lightly, "I will let you return to Licata. Without your lover what will you do there?" He smiled sardonically. "You should have been a better business woman, Christine; you should have insisted upon a settlement. Your looks justified it, and the 'paint' millionaire can well afford to be more sporting."

Christine bit her lip. She could have killed the man for his insolence.

"Thank you," she said. "I am really grateful."

Indeed, the sudden relief which his words gave brought a look of almost kindliness into her eyes. She was totally unprepared for it, because she knew that a part of Andrea Zarano's complex nature was his lust for mental torture. He had practised it upon her with almost fatal results in the old days. Her softer expression was not unnoticed.

"Sposa mia," he said sentimentally, "do you realise that I am doing a generous action? You have grown into a very lovely woman."

His words struck fresh terror into her heart. Was he only letting her go for the pleasure of trapping her and recapturing her?

"Thank you," she said hurriedly. "You will never regret it." Her voice was formal; her eyes had lost their gentleness. But he must not know the terror she was enduring. Again she said, "Thank you, Andrea. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, sposa mia," he said mockingly. "This has been a strange meeting." He put his hand to his throat.

"Take care of yourself—that wild cat lover of yours might become a dangerous bedfellow."

To Christine's great surprise he left her abruptly. As she stood watching him pick his way over the rough stones and shelving gravel, she realised that he was not so agile as he had been when she had watched him carry the wounded kid away to the farm. Long ago he had been almost as light of foot as Salvatore; to-day he had to look where he placed his feet; he took fewer risks.

She watched him with anxious eyes. He was walking in the opposite direction to the town. He was going, though Christine did not know it, to the small house which had been built for him to be near the site of some new excavations. He had returned to Sicily after a very long absence to work again for the Italian Government. In Sicily he was pretty well his own master and under less vigilant eyes than he had been in Crete or Egypt, which in more senses than one had become too warm for him. It had suited him to return to the island and accept the post which was offered him at Licata.

His struggle with Salvatore had exhausted him. It had not been without an effort of self-control that he had managed to talk to Christine and treat the matter lightly. It was, indeed, due to his physical exhaustion that he had consented to Christine's request. He never once looked back. As soon as he was out of sight he wanted to lie down and rest; only his vanity had saved him from a total collapse.

. . . .

The whole thing had been so sudden. It had come out of the stillness with the rush of a typhoon. The horror of it had raged and threatened and terrorised; death had been before her eyes and then as suddenly it had ceased. In less than half-an-hour she was alone in the blinding sunshine, alone with nothing but white stones and the scattered contents of Zita's tea-basket before her eyes. Was ever a scene more desolate or further removed from human passion? The sea which lay far beyond the field of white stones looked almost purple. Here and there the twisted and bind-blown trunks of ancient olvie-trees broke the flatness of the landscape. Some of them looked like the petrified torsos of a prehistoric people.

Christine gave an ugly laugh when she found herself packing up the tea-basket. How could such things matter? What was she doing it for? Where was she going?

It is the doing of conventional things which saves the human brain in such moments of agony. She not only packed the basket in an orderly and precise manner, but she shook out the twisted napkin three or four times and laid it on the flat stones to press out the creases; then she shook it out again. Would nothing rid it of its ugly suggestion? The fierce sun had dried it; the curled creases seemed indelible. Some hairs from Andrea's neck still stuck to it. When she left it alone it curled back again to the size of his throat. Would the sight of it ever leave her memory?

When the basket was packed she walked blindly and instinctively towards Licata. Her subconscious self guided her. It had determined to see Salvatore and to explain the whole thing to him. Her conscious self was incapable of definite thought or of any fixed plan.

She was covering the same ground as she had dawdled over an hour ago with Salvatore.

Once in Licata she went straight to the appointed meeting-place with Zita. But no Zita was to be seen. Christine looked up and down the street. Their motor was not in sight, nor was there any trace of the brother and sister. Had they both deserted her? Did Salvatore really believe that she was in love with her husband? His love, which had been her anchor, would surely have returned when his anger and jealousy had abated?

A waiter from a Locanda which was close to the church which was to have been their meeting-place, addressed her.

"Prego, Signora," he said, as he handed her a visiting-card, "I was to give you this." It was Zita's visiting-card. "The Signorina is in the hotel. She is waiting for you, Signora."

Christine followed the man, who took her into a pretentious little sitting-room, very full of uncomfortable furniture and cheap ornaments. Her super-senses noted the incongruity of Zita's surroundings. Her classical beauty gave them an added hideousness.

Zita did not raise her face as Christine entered the room, nor had she made any response to the waiter's announcement: "Ecco, Signorina, l'ho trovato."

Christine waited for the man to leave the room and then fell on her knees beside the figure of Melancholy which Zita presented.

"I have come to explain, Zita. Sorella mia, let me explain everything."

Zita only pressed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Look at me, Zita! Speak to me! Don't you know that I am nearly mad?" She pulled the girl's hands from her eyes.

"You have killed Salvatore," Zita said. Her voice was lifeless. It struck an agony of remorse into Christine's heart. "He will die—this is more than he can bear."

"But I can explain everything—I didn't mean to deceive either of you. It isn't such a serious thing as you think. Oh, Zita, if Salvatore had killed him . . . !" Christine's head went down on Zita's lap.

"Salvatore was honest with you. He had to tell you everything, even his one dishonest deed."

"How much has Salvatore told you, Zita? Do you know all that happened? Where is Salvatore?"

"I only know that your husband is alive—that is enough. Oh, why did you not tell him?"

"I tried to tell him, Zita, this very afternoon I tried, and also on the night we became engaged. I never meant to deceive him. I loved him so dearly that I just put off telling him from day to day—we haven't been long engaged."

"Engaged!" Zita laughed. "How could you be engaged when you knew you couldn't marry?"

"What on earth do you mean? Of course we can marry. I only hid the fact that I must divorce my husband because I wanted a few more days of perfect bliss, a few more days before anything unpleasant had to be discussed."

Zita looked into Christine's eyes. "Divorce, Primavera? You know my brother is a good Catholic?"

Christine tightened her grasp on the girl's arm. Her terrified eyes frightened Zita.

"You don't mean to tell me that Salvatore thinks I can never marry him while my husband is alive? That he doesn't believe in divorce?"

"Salvatore will be here very shortly; he must tell you himself." The tone of zita's voice was final.

"But you, Zita—surely you don't think that we must ruin our lives, that I must give up Salvatore? That I am to be punished and my husband go free? That my hideous marriage was a holy sacrament?"

"I don't think, Signora. I just know that while you are one man's wife you cannot be another's."

"Then you are mad," Christine said, "or rather, hopelessly ignorant of how unholy some marriages can be. I can divorce Andrea any day."

"And you thought Salvatore would marry you?"

"When I am free, he will marry me. He . . ."

Zita's voice stopped her. "When you are free? Poor Salvatore! My poor brother! Ah, Signora, it was cruel, cruel! How could you do it?"

"He wouldn't listen to anything about my husband and I . . . Oh, Zita, can't you understand, after all these years of suffering, how precious his love was? I never for one moment imagined that he would think like that about divorce—it is so unlike either of you."

"But, Primavera, you know that Salvatore is a religious man! He is far more religious than I am."

"It is not a question of being religious. The Church made these laws; they have nothing to do with our belief in God or trying to be Christ-like in our lives. The civil law of the State allows us to marry again; it is a Christian State."

"As members of the Catholic Church we do not question, we obey." Zita spoke in a lifeless yet definite way. With a Catholic the question of divorce was beyond dispute.

"You are both so modern, so intelligent; you have thought for yourselves in other matters. You know quite well that Sicilians ignore the laws of their country when they do not approve of them; any Italian only keeps those that he thinks are good and wise. Why should the same men be so law-abiding to the Church?"

"When laws are passed by parliament, by men who have only their own interests at heart and not their country's good, Signora, no independent Italian dreams of keeping them. What would their country eventually become if they did? But laws made by God—they are different, Signora."

"Laws made by the Church, you mean, the early Fathers of the Church, who were just as much party people and quite as self-interested as any modern politician! The only difference was that their aim was church glorification."

Christine put her arms round the unresponsive girl. She must make her see reason.

"Has Salvatore told you nothing beyond the fact that he saw my husband?"

Zita shook her head. "He was too overcome. He could not speak to me; he couldn't tell me."

"Then listen, Zita. Salvatore would have killed Andrea if I had not saved him. He was choking him with a wet napkin; he threw it over his head from behind. Andrea was helpless. I saw murder in Salvatore's eyes. At the time I could only think of one thing—if he killed Andrea I could not marry him." Christine paused. The girls were staring at each other wildly. In Christine's eyes there was the horror of the scene which she had witnessed. "Listen, Zita. Andrea was almost at his last gasp when Salvatore heard my wild screams. He looked at me and said, 'If I spare his life it is because you love him. . . . Tell me, do you love him?' "

Zita was trembling. "Poor Primavera!" she said weakly. "Poor Primavera!"

"To save Salvatore, to save your brother and my lover from murder, I said I loved the man who had ruined my life, the man I hate more than anything on earth."

While Christine was describing to Zita what had occurred, the door had opened and Salvatore had entered the room. He sprang to her side. His face was withered and white; ten years had passed over his head.

"Did you tell me you loved him to save me? Is that why you are here?"

Christine flung herself into his arms. "Yes, yes! Of course I did! Why didn't you understand! Oh, Salvatore, kiss me and love me! Only your love matters! I was almost mad with misery."

Salvatore's arms were round her, but they were not a lover's arms.

"I am yours, all yours, beloved. You must know that it is true. I only tried to save you, for if you had murdered him I could never have married you." She laughed and cried hysterically. "Say it is all right, dearest—the agony has passed!" She pressed her lips to his; she knew the intoxication of her kisses. Her words ended in a wail, her arms slackened, her lips begged for no more. Her endurance had reached its limit.

Zita had thrown herself face downwards on the sofa, to blind herself to the agony of the lovers.

Christine's silence and her physical exhaustion quickly reduced Salvatore to the level of humanity. His suspicions were banished. For the moment every obstacle to their happiness was forgotten. Only one thing triumphed—her love for him.

. . . .

"Zita," Christine cried, "Zita, I am forgiven! Salvatore knows that I only lied to save him." She turned to Salvatore. "Dearest," she murmrued, "I couldn't let your hands do it—how could I?"

As Zita raised her head, her eyes met Salvatore's. They questioned him eagerly. Had he indeed renounced his Church and his religion?

In a dull voice she reminded the lovers that the afternoon had almost gone, that they must get back to Girgenti before the quick darkness descended.

Salvatore looked at his watch. Zita was right; they must be making their way home. A little of the ecstacy with which Christine's caresses had lighted up his face left it. Zita's eyes and words had brought him back to the world of reality. His eyes did not answer her questioning gaze. Had he renounced his Church? She wondered. If he had she could not tell at the moment whether she was glad or sorry. If he had renounced it it was for the woman who had saved him from committing a hideous murder.

As Salvatore closed the door behind him and went off to bring the car round to the locanda, Christine put her arms round Zita and said:

"You see, piccola sorella, it is all right. Salvatore said nothing about the divorce. All that he was unhappy about was the silly fear that I still loved Andrea."

Zita was silent. The unfolding of her motor-veil seemed to demand all her thoughts and attention.

Christine took her hands in her own. "Are you glad, Zita mia? Are you glad that I was right? Say something—don't sit there like a dumb thing."

"Gentilissima Signora"—Zita had slipped back into the old formal address—"if Salvatore can do it, I shall be very glad. I am a Catholic, but I love Salvatore, I love him far more than my own soul. If he can marry you and be happy I shall be glad."

Zita tried to be very gentle and kind, but more than that she could not be. Her beloved Primavera, her almost divine

Signora, had been capable of deceit; she had hidden from Salvatore the fact that her husband was alive, even after Salvatore had made his confession in public of his youthful act of dishonesty! The comparison in Zita's eyes was disparaging to Christine. Salvatore had broken the eighth commandment. Christine was quite willing to break the seventh, and to Zita the breaking of the seventh meant more than the breaking of the eighth, for it involved disobedience to the Church. For her it was adultery if Christine lived with Salvatore while her husband was alive, for nothing in the wide world but the death of Andrea would make Christine a free woman.

Christine felt Zita's new attitude towards her. It had come as a surprise and a shock to her that the girl whom she thought she understood, the modern and travelled Zita, still believed in the dogmas and laws of her Church as truly as she believed that God made the world. However, as Salvatore apparently did not think as she did, she comforted herself with the assurance that he would convince his sister and prove to her that the doctrines of the Church are not divine decrees.

. . . .

The first part of their drive home was very trying, for Zita and Christine sat together in the body of the car, whilst Salvatore sat in the front seat. Christine felt that her modern little friend had suddenly slipped back into the church-fearing, priest-ridden Sicilian of ten years ago.

Towards the end of the journey, however, Zita's soft little figure gradually nestled closer to Christine; her hand pressed her arm. When Christine looked into her upturned face she saw tears rolling down her pale cheeks.

For the rest of their journey they were happier and more at their ease. Zita's attitude became silently expressive of sympathy and melancholy. For many years the world had spoilt her; she had grown accustomed to wealth, pleasure and happiness. All that Salvatore had undertaken had succeeded; wherever they went they had made friends and met with kindness and attention. Her later years had been so bewilderingly novel and amusing that she had been able to brush aside all small worries. Wealth is a golden key; youth does not easily tire of fitting it into new locks. Suddenly, and in the cruellest manner, her happiness had seemed completely destroyed. Everything she believed in was shattered. Salvatore was the sun of her world. To-day she had discovered that he was also a shattered idol, a broken image.

. . . .

Christine saw very little of either Zita or Salvatore that night. After dinner Zita went off to bed and Salvatore excused himself on the plea of having business to attend to. When he came out on to the terrace to say good-night to Christine, he held her in a long and tender embrace. He might have been leaving her for years instead of one night.

Christine tried to laugh at his tragic air. But her whispered words brought no smile to his eyes or lightness to his heart. Again clouds had gathered in his radiant world.

"You are so grave and I am so happy, beloved," she said, "so gloriously happy. I suppose I had to be unhappy for all these years, so as to be worthy of you and of all that life is going to give us in the future."

Salvatore's last kiss served instead of an answer and Christine went to bed confident in the belief that the tragedy of the afternoon had only served to unite her more closely to her lover.

CHAPTER XXVIII

The next morning when Christine came downstairs Zita welcomed her with a grave face.

"Salvatore left this note for you," she said. "He has been called away on very important business."

"And he never even called out good-bye!" Christine's face was immediately clouded. "Couldn't he have spared one minute?" She took the note from Zita. "Did he tell you he was going?" Jealousy sharpened her voice; a cold hand clutched at her heart.

"No. The padrona told me." Zita's voice broke.

Christine held out her hand. "I was a pig! Forgive me, Zitina. But it is so disappointing, so strange."

She opened the letter. It ran:

"Mio dolce Amore,

"I must leave you and Zita for a few days. Please don't go out alone and on no account go beyond the city limits until I return. Do this and spare me unnecessary anxiety. Addio.

"Yours as ever and for ever devotedly and in haste,

"SALVATORE."

Christine handed the letter to Zita. "He never spoke a word about having to leave us yesterday. What can it be? I saw him for five minutes late last night."

"Sometimes he has to leave me like that. It can't be helped. That is why I remained so long at school."

"Then you think there is no need to worry?"

"It is certainly strange that he did not say good-bye. Otherwise it is just what he is often compelled to do."

Christine drank her coffee and ate her buttered roll in silence. Salvatore's note was loving and thoughtful. There was no use in trying to create trouble and anxiety where there was none, but Zita's grave eyes made it a little difficult for her to feel cheerful and confident.

It was a glorious morning and the distant view in front of the terrace looked more than usually beautiful. The far-off temples were just discernible through a soft haze which hung over the plain; it was drifting landwards from the sea. Sicilian cries, shrill but musical, caught her ears; they were the morning cries of vegetable sellers.

The two girls on the terrace listened subconsciously to the life of the people which was going on below their high point of vantage. To Zita all things were new and yet strangely familiar.

At last Christine said, "How are we going to amuse ourselves until Salvatore returns? We aren't Sicilian enough to watch these people all day long, although it's really the nicest thing to do in Girgenti."

Zita shook her head.

"That means you don't care. Zita dear, do be less despondent. Surely we can be happy together? Will you help me to finish my muslin frock? You are so clever."

"Of course, if you would like me to."

"I've scarcely put a stitch in it. The time has just flown!"

"We were too happy to sew!"

"We are happy still, silly child!" Christine put her arms round Zita. "I want to shake you and wake you up, you tragic Madonnina! Look—who's that? What a good-looking man! He's lifting his very fine hat to you."

As Zita looked down disinterestedly she caught Sardo Fontana's eyes. "Good morning. Come sta?"

"Come sta?" he said. "May I come and see you later on?"

"Yes, we shall be here all day." She turned to Christine. "It is Sardo Fontana. He was coming to-morrow night any way, but he seemed so glad to see me and so anxious to come, what could I do but invite him?"

"Why not? It will help to pass the time for you." Christine's eyes followed the man up the hill. "I can see what you mean about his clothes and . . ."

Zita did not allow her to finish her sentence. "Oh, but he is very nice. He is a part of one's old life. He makes the world feel more stable, more true."

"Do you mean that you have lost your faith in me, Zita?"

"I don't know, Primavera. I don't know what I believe. Don't ask me. I only know I love you and now you have done something I don't understand. Even Salvatore puzzles me, and yet I love him so much that I want him to do what he is doing. I should be just as unhappy if he acted otherwise."

"What is he doing? What do you mean?"

"He is behaving as your lover; he apparently means to marry you."

"Oh," Christine said, "is it that all over again? Why will you go on worrying about a thing which is of course unpleasant, but really of no importance? Che sara sara—it has to be gone through."

"Salvatore's conscience is of great importance. If he marries you—or rather, if he goes through a form of marriage with you, I don't believe he will be happy. I know he won't. Perhaps he has gone away for that reason."

"Oh!" Christine cried. "Then you want me to give him up?"

"No, no! I want him to be happy and without you I think he would die. You don't know yet how much he loves you, or all that your love means to him."

"Then what do you want? I am not to give him up and yet he will not be happy if he marries me!"

"I don't know what I want. That is why I am so unhappy. The problem cannot be solved."

"Salvatore isn't of your opinion, thank goodness!"

Zita remained silent.

"Look at his note—read it again."

Zita read it. "Every word of it is true. He has been yours in thought and in spirit all these years. I know it."

"You think he only means that?" Christine spoke almost pityingly. She knew better. She had enjoyed his assurance of a more human and natural devotion.

"I can't think, Christine. What happened yesterday has made so me stupid, so brainless! I am bewildered. You should not listen to what I say—just believe what you like."

"You still love me? You aren't angry with me?"

"If only he were dead!" Zita said impulsively. "If only he were dead! Or if there had been no yesterday afternoon! You could have married him so soon!"

"Why will you keep on saying 'You could,' Zita? Salvatore knows that I can divorce Andrea."

"Ah, Signora, does he?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"Because God married you." Zita's eyes were grave.

"God never did such a cruel thing. God is all love and mercy and sympathy. Would it be like a loving Father or a kind Friend to do such a thing? Would anyone who was all-Love marry an ignorant, romantic girl to a villain? Would any God do such a thing?"

"You married him against your aunt's wishes."

"Yes, because I was young and foolish. If it had been against God's wish of course He wouldn't have let me do it. And if it was His wish He certainly would not have revenged Himself in that hideous manner. It is only your Church that teaches you these things. They aren't true, Zita mia. They are unfair to Christianity."

"But the Church cannot marry you to Salvatore!"

"All the same, I am going to marry Salvatore, little stupid. And as I said to Salvatore, I am almost glad it all happened. I so hated him not knowing. It was always there, always spoiling my happiness. And then when I tried to tell him he just wouldn't listen, and always I was so glad, so awfully glad."

"Poor Primavera! But I want to go to Church." Zita spoke determinedly. "I feel so wicked; I must try and make my thoughts less awful." She looked at Christine. "All the time I am wishing that someone would kill your husband. I feel like a murderess, and that is almost as wicked as being one."

"Wait for a minute and I will come with you."

"No, no. I can go alone—it's so near. I will only go to the little church round there." Zita pointed to the whitewashed building tucked away in the bastion of the wall which guarded their terrace.

"It is just there, I know—I could throw this cigarette on it. But you have to go through the streets to reach it.

Come along, let's go together. Remember what Salvatore said in his letter. I know he wouldn't like you to go alone." Her voice sank to a whisper. "I suppose he is afraid of Andrea."

. . . . . .

The two girls were kneeling together in the old church in which Sardo Fontana had handed Zita his fatal note. Zita had been praying long and earnestly.

As Christine watched her she said to herself, "I hope when Sardo Fontana comes he will make her forget yesterday's tragedy. She is still highly emotional."

To her surprise and pleasure she noticed Sardo Fontana enter the church at that moment. He tiptoed to a seat close behind Zita. He proceeded to watch her closely through his uplifted hands.

Christine rose from her knees and left the building. Sardo would see Zita home; he was evidently waiting until the girl had finished her prayers. His company would be far better for her.

When Zita rose from her knees and walked to the door of the church, Sardo did the same. They met as if by chance just as she was pushing aside the leather curtain. Sardo smiled as she recognised him in the bright sunlight.

"It is strange to meet here again, Signorina. Much water has passed under the bridge since the last time we dipped under that curtain together."

"Sì, molto, molto." Zita's eyes were unsmiling.

"But you are in trouble?" She saw that her tears pained him. "Can you let me help you, Signorina? For the sake of long ago trust me with your trouble. A trouble shared is a trouble halved."

"Yes, we are in much trouble," Zita said simply, "but no-one can help us. You could do nothing."

As she said the words she remembered his words: "If the man were alive I would find him and kill him!" A curious chill trickled over her skin.

"If I do not know what it is, that is true, Signorina.

You were so happy three days ago, so untroubled. And now . . . !"

"Our poor palace of pleasure has fallen to the ground. But don't ask me to tell you. No, no!" Zita shook her head, her expression changed.

Sardo Fontana saw fear in her eyes, where there had been tears.

"Let us rest here, on this wall, and talk things over, for I too have something which I must tell you. It is not pleasant news, but I think you ought to know it." He looked at her. "The bearer of ill tidings is always an ugly fellow, Signorina."

"Tell me," she said eagerly, "what have you heard?"

"That Count Zarano, as he still calls himself, is alive, that he is the excavator of the classic sites at Licata."

"You knew it? And yet you asked me to tell you our trouble?" She looked at him with eyes which expressed more than amazement.

"But surely, Signorina, things are not so bad as all that? The Contessa can divorce him. He has formed new ties and I suppose he has long since ceased to support her?"

"Sacre Madre! You too can say these things? You too can speak lightly of divorce?"

"No, not lightly," he said quickly. "Remember, the Contessa is above suspicion. In this case . . ."

"All cases are the same," Zita said, interrupting him impatiently. "Marriage is for better or for worse."

"Ma! Signorina, you don't mean that your brother will give her up? He will not take advantage of the law of his country? Your brother knows what the Count is."

"Salvatore loves Primavera so much that for the present he does not know what to do. We have not discussed it; but I know him. If he lives with her he will never be happy. The laws of his Church mean more to him than the laws of the State." She looked up. "You know how the laws of the State are made. You can remain a loyal and patriotic

Italian even if you break a hundred laws made by the vile politicians who are ruining the country. With the Church it is different."

"You make me feel ashamed, piccola donna. You are so in earnest. Your Church means so much to you."

"And to you?" she asked. "Would you marry a woman who had divorced her husband because she wished to marry you?"

"Veramenta, donninina, if the woman I loved could be mine for the divorcing of a bad husband, or for the killing of him, I would marry her and worship her."

"Amico mio! Amico mio!" Zita murmured the words pityingly. She was the woman for whom he would do these things!

"The woman I love is the custodian of my soul, donna mia."

While they spoke without words, the silence became acute.

"And Primavera thinks as you think," Zita said nervously. "She never imagined that we should think otherwise. Thousands of Protestants are divorced every year and marry again. I suppose because we have lived in America she thought it wouldn't matter."

"Then she knew?" he said slowly. "She knew?"

"You mustn't blame her," Zita said loyally. "She was only weak because she was so happy, so happy that she put off telling us. Salvatore will tell you how she tried to tell him more than once."

Sardo Fontana was silent. His mind was working rapidly.

"Don't you understand how it was? Poor Primavera! She has suffered so much; happiness and Salvatore's love were so precious. You must remember, she really thought that it did not matter. But now! What are we to do? What in heaven's name are we to do?"

"I can't advise you, for I don't feel about divorce as you do. If I were Salvatore, I should marry her."

"Why did you come to church? Are you not a good Catholic?"

"Si, si." He laughed. "Ma, I suppose I treat the Church as you treat the State. When I approve of its laws I obey them, when I don't I break them. I go to church to pray to God; I believe and hope that He is above all these dogmatic disputes. But this morning I didn't go to pray."

"Oh, don't!" Zita said. "Please don't!" Her distress touched him.

"I will try not to," he said apologetically.

"I want a trustworthy friend, not a lover. Won't you be that friend?"

"Half a cake is better than none. I will do my best."

Zita held out her hand. He clasped it eagerly.

"Madonnina! Madonnina!" he said. "You are so beautiful! How can a man do what you ask? How can I be no more to you than a friend when there is nothing of me but love for you?"

His sudden and vehement outburst was only what Zita had expected. Sooner or later she knew that it would come. She knew the moment she saw him at the church door that she must make him understand that if they were to see much of one another, he must be contented with her friendship.

She did not withdraw her hand. She was an adept in the art of conciliation. She could always make the most ardent pleader see that it was wiser to accept what she was willing to give than be banished for ever because he could not get all that he wanted. Sardo's speech could still be reckoned with in the abstract. All that she had to do was to warn him that as a friend he could see as much of her as his time permitted; as a lover he must say farewell.

He took the warning and meant to abide by it. He felt confident that Salvatore's love for Christine, which had been so enduring, would triumph. He judged him by his own feelings and convictions. Manlike, he loved Zita all the more intensely for her earnest and devout religious sentiments. Women should be conscientiously religious. On the other hand, if Salvatore renounced Christine on account of his convictions, as a man and a lover he would be unworthy of her. With Sardo the Church came a long way after the woman.

When they parted at the door of the Albergo, in spite of the seriousness of their conversation, Zita was in a less depressed state than when she had parted with Christine. It does a woman's spirits good to meet a man who desires and admires her. In ten cases out of twelve his passion thrills her if it does not bore her.

CHAPTER XXIX

By Sunday evening the gown which Zita had helped Christine to make was finished. As Sardo Fontana was coming, Zita begged her to put it on. She wished Christine to look her very best.

Scarcely anything happened during the evening, nothing that bears recording, beyond the fact that Sardo Fontana was greatly impressed by Christine, so greatly that he stood a little in awe of her and therefore did but poor justice to himself. Zita knew that Christine was acutely conscious of all his shortcomings and of his air of almost acknowledged social inferiority.

But Christine was determined to make him her friend and put him at his ease. She wanted his influence when the time came for discussing the subject of her divorce. She certainly did win his admiration and respect, if it cannot be truthfully said that she succeeded in putting the poor man at his ease. Zita possessed that human gift of sympathy which is so peculiarly Latin; she was "simpatica." Christine could be sympathetic and very often was so; but on this occasion, where Zita would have succeeded, she failed.

When she left the terrace, after they had drank their coffee and smoked for a little time, Zita turned quickly to her companion. Her eyes questioned him; they asked, What do you think of her?

"Come e bella," he said spontaneously, "come e bella."

Zita smiled. "And she is altogether beautiful. Long ago she was just as nice to me as she is now."

"Senta! Signorina, tell me—am I correct? Was she with you in the cake-shop that day? Do you remember?"

"Yes."

He sighed. "I remember it all so well. Her clear blue eyes are just the same; they are so unlike the Sicilian blue."

"Poor Salvatore! How he suffered that day!" Zita told him very quietly the events of that afternoon. "Caro Salvatore," she said thoughtfully, "he was so wounded. We lived humbly, as you know, amico mio, but the Mazzinis did not always live like that." Her eyes sought his. "Salvatore's character shows how directly the great Mazzini blood flows in his veins." She laughed tenderly. "My father married the daughter of a dreamer and an inventor like himself, and so we just drifted down and down until . . ." she shrugged her shoulders, "well until it was very beautiful and wonderful of the Signorina Lovat, as she then was, to make a friend of me and to treat my brother as her equal."

"Si, si." He nodded his head. "Hers is not only a charming face; it is a noble one. Your brother will be happy. He is fortunate; everything he does succeeds. He is a strange mixture of a practical man and an idealist."

"Since I saw you yesterday morning I have banished thought. I have been singing and playing and . . . yes, really . . . I made the dress Christine is wearing."

"You can do anything, Signorina, you are everything."

A warning hand went up. "Don't forget! Don't make me not nice to you, or I shan't be able to sing. What shall I sing?—some gay Neapolitan song?"

"Anything, Signorina, except 'caro nome.'" He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps some day, if the fates are kind—qui sait?"

"Do you know this? Everyone in Naples is singing it just now?" She hummed a catchy fisherman's air.

"Yes, I know it." He hummed the air with her.

"Then let's sing it together. It's so gay and yet so strangely melancholy; so typically Neapolitan with its fascinating jerky time. Neapolitan music is so expressive of that gay pagan city, which is always jesting and playing with life. I love the brave way it snaps its fingers at care while all the time Vesuvius lies smouldering behind it."

Sardo's eyes drank in every word she said. He nodded his head. They sang again for a few minutes.

"Our voices go well together," she said gaily.

"I thought so ten years ago."

"When I made that noise?"

"When I gave you my heart," he said solemnly.

"Ma, that was rash, for we didn't know each other."

"Prego, Signorina, what is knowing? Do we ever know anyone? How often had Salvatore seen the Contessa?" Sardo always spoke of Christine as the Contessa.

"Three times, I think."

"And he remembered her all these years?"

"But he is a Mazzini. Our men are all the same; no Mazzini was ever faithless to a lover or to a cause."

"You are a Mazzini, Signorina."

Zita again raised a warning hand. "Basta!" was all she said laughingly.

"It is impossible, Signorina, im-pos-si-ble." He spoke slowly and in Italian.

"What is impossible?"

"I love you, Signorina, and I am human." He rose to go. "Any man would tell you the same thing."

"I am so sorry." Zita spoke as if she had been rude and was apologising. "I owed you so much long ago. I wish I could . . ." she paused. "I really wish . . ."

"That you could love me? It needs no saying."

Zita was silent.

He looked at her with grave eyes. "It would be a pleasure to suffer for you, donna mia. Physical agony borne for you would be exquisite. Anything but this poor attempt at friendship!" He threw back his head and stopped abruptly.

"Ah, here comes La Primavera!" Zita said. "Doesn't she look like a spirit? She should never have left us, amico mio."

"In the old Sicily she dared not have been so kind."

"In the real Sicily it does not happen now; it is only you and I who have changed. We are no longer true Sicilians."

"If I had the Wishing Cap, Signorina, I would wish that we were Sicilians again, that we were just as we were ten years ago."

Zita refused to be serious. "Primavera, come here!" she called out. "Signor Fontana says that if he had a Wishing Cap, he would put it on and wish that we were just as we were ten years ago. What do you say?"

Christine answered immediately, "Certainly not. I'd go through it all again for this."

"I congratulate you, Signora. Fate has not been so kind to me," he said simply. "I have prospered financially; but what is money without a home? And my only child . . ." he threw back his head.

Christine's eyes met his; he saw that she was wholly sympathetic. And indeed she was, for the situation as it stood was strangely pathetic to her. She saw it very plainly—the disillusionment of the girl and the infatuation of the man. All that he said was so good and true, and yet there was so much that was wrong about him. They were such pathetically small points upon which he failed. The nuances of what we call good breeding are so small and so delicate that they will not bear the rough handling of words. It is impossible to give a purely Western mind a correct impression of the man's social shortcomings, for where an Englishman would have failed, Sardo succeeded, and where an Englishman would have been quite correct, he was all wrong.

Everything Zita did or said seemed to plunge him more deeply into the ocean of love, and the more in love with her he became, the less chance he allowed himself of winning her. When he said good-bye to her, to see her again had become as essential to him as drink is to a drunkard.

When the girls were left alone on the terrace, Christine said abruptly, "Why don't you kill your victim and be done with it, Zitina? Don't play the cat-and-mouse trick! I hate to see you torturing him."

Zita looked at her in astonishment. "Torturing him? Oh, Christine, if only I couldn't see his waxed moustache and his . . ."

"And the too big flower in his buttonhole," Christine added, "and his lavender satin tie and his . . ."

"Don't, don't!" Zita said. "I nearly let him kiss me—I hated them so much."

"To crucify the flesh?"

"Because I felt such a low down thing."

"You think you shouldn't be affected by these things, that the man is above them?"

"They shouldn't matter. He saved me once; he would kill himself to make me happy now."

"You wouldn't notice these things or care a fig about them if you loved him."

"But if it isn't these things which prevent me loving him, what is it? I once loved him, or I thought I did."

"You've developed, passed away from him. You can't make yourself love him, so don't try. But for pity's sake don't lead him on to think that you ever will."

"Oh, I don't! I have told him that very plainly, very cruelly."

"But what have you looked, Zitina? What have those melting eyes not said? What have they not made him hope?"

"I can't be horrid when people are nice. I was only quite natural, I was just my own self."

"Then I suppose the Almighty is to blame for making any woman such an intensified atom of adorableness. Come to bed. This time to-morrow night Salvatore will be here." She sighed. "When I watch you, I only wish I could be one quarter as nice and tender to him."

"Oh, but you are, carina! To Salvatore you are divine and all your ways are the best."

"That is because he is a Mazzini and he can't help being faithful." Christine laughed happily. "What a glorious quality to possess! What an inheritance!" She paused and then said abruptly, as though she had torn her mind from distant things, "Good-night, Zitina."

"Good-night, sorella mia." Zita's use of the word "sister" was intentional; her love for Christine so often triumphed over her anxiety for Salvatore's future; her fears came and went like neuralgic pains.

"Thanks, dearest. Good-night." Christine's eyes shone happily. The girl's intentional use of the word which she had not used since the tragedy of Licata seemed a happy augury.

CHAPTER XXX

To do honour to her lover's return the next day Christine put on her white muslin frock, and Zita had bought for tea the most delicate and appetising pasticceria she could find in the town. Salvatore had a great weakness for the light pastry of Sicily.

Christine was waiting for his coming on the terrace. When he did at last arrive, the padrona ushered him out with the words, "Lui stesso (himself), Signora Contessa."

As Christine looked at "lui stesso" who was walking to meet her, she saw a new man, a worn and physically exhausted one, a mere suggestion of the old Salvatore. At the moment he looked twice his real age.

"My darling," she cried, "you are ill! Have you had fever? Where on earth have you been? Why did you go away?"

Salvatore took her outstretched hands, but he made no attempt to embrace her.

"You poor darling," she said, "you are absolutely worn out! Come and have a cup of tea. Zita has bought your favourite 'squashy cakes.' " Her voice suddenly trailed off, a feeling of mystery and disaster overwhelmed her. As he remained silent, she said excitedly, "Salvatore, what is the matter? Why don't you speak to me? Are you too ill to want my lips?" They were held up to his.

Salvatore sank into a chair. He made no attempt to speak. His eyes were fixed on the ground.

Christine knelt down beside him. "My dearest, you are unkind! Don't frighten me. Tell me, what has happened? Tell me what you've been doing."

"I have been fighting," he said "fighting a deadly duel."

"Salvatore!" Christine's cry rang through the air. "You haven't killed him? You didn't leave me to do that?"

"That would not have been so hard. He still pollutes the earth."

"Then what do you mean?" For a moment Christine wondered if he were delirious; fever patients go through strange phases of delirium.

He touched her white dress and bright hair with trembling hands. "If only you weren't so beautiful! Why this new temptation?" His wretched eyes gazed at her accusingly.

"Zita made it for me, to please you." She spoke humouringly. Surely he was delirious?

"It's beautiful," he said. "But if only you had been a little less enchanting!"

"Dear man, don't be foolish! We are all going to have tea together. Zita has been very happy all day long because you were coming back to us."

"She has been happy?" He looked surprised.

"Just full of fun and nonsense—the old Gioconda."

"Then I was wrong. That is odd, very odd."

"What do you mean?"

"I felt that she was with me, that's all. I thought she knew; always when I suffer, she suffers too."

"I shall be jealous of Zita." Christine tried to laugh. "When did you begin to feel ill, to suffer? Won't you tell me?"

"I am not ill," he said wearily, "not in the way you think." He turned his head away. "If I sit like this perhaps I can tell you. No, don't touch me. Let me be strong. Don't come any nearer—stay there."

"Dear man, you are crazy! Whatever has happened to you?" Christine's voice was desperate.

"All must be over between us," he said defiantly. "That is what I am trying to tell you. You are another man's wife. Nothing can make you mine, not all my years of love and devotion."

As he shook his head a heartbroken cry pierced the air. It was carried down to the peaceful farms encircled by high defences of prickly pears. As it rang out Salvatore shivered and shrunk; it had stabbed his heart like a dagger.

Long after the cry came Christine's broken words. "You have given me up? You mean you are not going to marry me? You can do this thing Salvatore?"

"I must," he said. "You can't be the wife of two men."

"Then let me be your mistress." The fighting instinct was roused in Christine. "In my own eyes I shall be your wife."

He moved further away from her. "It can never mean happiness for either of us, and I can only give you up if I behave as I am behaving."

"It would mean happiness for me, Salvatore. I would rather be your mistress than any other man's wife. Oh, my dearest," she said desperately, "can't you love me a little more than your church?"

"Don't you know that if I didn't love you more than anything in the world I should agree to do what you suggest? I should go through this mockery of a marriage. Primavera mia, he said brokenly, "don't you understand? Don't you know that it is because you are what you are to me, that I can't do it?"

"You left me meaning to do this?"

"I left you because I was too weak to do it, too weak until I had fought out the duel with my higher self."

"Your higher self has triumphed! The poor human woman who cares for nothing but your love has been beaten!"

"Sacramento," he said wildly, "don't torture me!" He writhed in his chair, but he kept his eyes determinedly turned from her while he spoke.

"Oh, Salvatore, if I could only make you see things sanely and reasonably! You know that if we were both free and if we were married in your church by ten bishops and six archbishops and a dozen priests, we should not be man and wife according to the laws of your State, unless we were also married at the Municipio. Whereas if we were married at the Municipio and not in the church at all, we should be man and wife. It is the State contract that matters. I can be divorced by the State and married by the State, thank God."

"You think so?" He shook his head.

Christine became impatient. "I knew you were a Roman Catholic, but I never dreamed that you still thought like that. Do you believe that the Pope has temporal as well as spiritual power?

"No, no," He spoke quickly. "I think temporal things belong to the State, but our marriage belonged to things spiritual."

"Belonged?" Christine sobbed. "Oh, Salvatore 'belonged'? Why do you speak of it as if it were a thing of the past?"

"It is past," he said. "Your husband is alive; until he is dead you are his wife."

"You tried to kill him, and yet you are too religious to marry me?"

"Why did you save him? He needed killing."

She caught hold of his hand. "Tell me, would you have married me? Would you, Salvatore?"

"There can be no answer to that question. At the time I gave no thought to the future or to what I should do." He withdrew his hand. "This I do know—that I was not going to take his life so that I might marry his widow. The man wanted killing! I should have done it."

Christine fell on her knees beside his chair; her head sought his knees. "Take me, she said pitifully. "Oh, do take me! Our love can't be wrong! If you love me as I love you, you couldn't doubt it, you simply couldn't!"

Salvatore's strength was ebbing. He tried to draw himself away from the long arms which were creeping further and further round his exhausted body. He was silent, but soon his lips were pressed to her throat. His body no longer sought for distance. It was throbbing against hers, throbbing and trembling as a man's body trembles when passion has to be mastered, when desire drives and honour holds the reins.

"My husband, my dear, dear man, say something! Tell me you won't do it again! You have nearly killed your Christine. Oh, my darling, my darling, why have you been so foolish? Why did you make this trouble? We were so happy!" She paused for a moment; her ears hungered for assurance. "Don't only kiss me, Salvatore! Say you won't leave me, say over and over again, 'sposa mia, sposa mia,' as you used to say it! Have you forgotten so soon?" Christine waited. "Have you forgotten how you implored me to fix our wedding-day?"

. . . .

Evening cries were reaching their ears from the road below. The toilers in the fields were returning to the city. "Amonine, amonine!" came from the different voices of the mule and donkey riders. Young kids were bleating as they hurried after their mothers, who were following the herdsmen in their own straggling and disobedient fashion.

Christine had listened to the same sounds in the morning with a happy heart and satisfied mind. In the evening Salvatore would be with her; they would be watching these same workers returning to the town and to their homes.

The evening had come and with it the accustomed sounds. There were the high flying birds, mere black specks in the sky, homing their familiar way.

Salvatore's silence maddened her; it kept her heart full of fear.

"I have done all the love-making," she said bitterly, "all of it! I feel like one of Bernard Shaw's odious women! Can't you help my fallen pride?"

"Primavera mia," he said gently, "sempre sorridente, sempre allegra, sempre rosea." It was his old greeting.

"That's not what I want." She held his face in her two hands. "I am not going to let you off. Say just as you used to say, 'Mogliettina,' 'sposa mia,' and all the other things you could never say often enough."

Someone had come out on to the terrace. She slipped from Salvatore's arms, and stood up.

"Now do let's be cheerful," she said. "Here comes Zita; she is just recovering from the shock she got at Licata."

Salvatore took his sister in his arms and held her hungrily to him. A pang of jealousy poisoned Christine's joy. Zita clung to him and hugged him as if he had been parted from her for years instead of days.

When Salvatore let her go Zita made no remark upon the change in his appearance. She accepted it as if she had expected it. She knew her brother's nature and constitution, how quickly any unhappiness or anxiety taxed his not too strong physique.

"You will be better without me," Christine said sadly. "I will have my tea indoors."

"Oh, Primavera!" Zita said. "Why do you say that?"

"You know why, Zita. You don't need telling. Salvatore only went away to be able to say good-bye to me for ever."

"Primavera! Pri-ma-vera!"

"I believe you knew it, Zita."

Zita turned swiftly to Salvatore. "Fratello mio, fratello mio, how much you must have suffered while we made dresses and talked such rubbish! But for all that my heart was breaking, all the time I was suffering with you!"

Salvatore's eyes met Zita's. He had not been mistaken.

"He is so trying, Zita," Christine said. "He says nothing, nothing at all of what is to be done or of what he means to do."

"I am going to leave you," Salvatore said abruptly, "because I am not strong enough to stay!"

"You are going away?" both girls cried out at once.

"Yes. I have engaged a man from Cook's office to take both of you back to Ischia. I shall meet Zita in Naples; he will bring her there to me."

"Then it is all over," Christine said. Her mouth suddenly became dry and parched; she could only speak with difficulty.

"It must be," he said. "It is best that you should think me heartless. Anything is easier to bear than your love."

"Zita, I have just told Salvatore that I will willingly and gladly become his mistress if he can't think of me as his wife." A sob broke her dry throat. "I have had no very good reason to feel proud of the word 'wife,' have I? Let him call me by any name he chooses, his love will remain equally dear to me."

She turned to leave them, while Salvatore and Zita stood together, hating themselves for hurting her and despising themselves for the very act which they were torturing themselves to perform. They felt like cowards and defaulters.

When Christine had gone a few steps along the terrace, she turned suddenly and said to them, "I shall go back to Ischia alone. It is absurd to think that I require any companion or man from Cook's."

"I can't allow it," Salvatore said.

"You have just renounced the right to say that." She looked at him very searchingly. "If you really mean all this, Salvatore, I shall go away to-morrow. I shall go back to the old life in Ischia. The sooner this is a thing of the past the better it will be for us both. Tell me, do you mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. Our marriage is impossible."

"Then good-bye," she said softly. "And please don't try to see me again, for I too must be strong."

Zita sprang after her. "Cara Primavera, let me come with you. Let me try to comfort you."

Christine looked at her affectionately. "No-one can comfort me, Zita. I have suffered so much, I can suffer again. I am not like Salvatore—unhappiness won't kill me. It only makes me a hard fighter. Now leave me," she said sternly, "and go back to Salvatore."

. . . .

When Zita returned to Salvatore he was still seated as she had left him, in a large basket chair near the wall of the terrace, his head buried in his hands, his tired body shrunk into something pathetically delicate and inert. She sat down on the wall beside him; her presence was all she could offer him, her silent, sympathetic presence.

They had each other. Christine had no-one. They had, besides, all which they had so much enjoyed before she had re-entered their lives—they had health, wealth and youth. The world was their playground; they could do what they wished and go where they wished.

And yet they had nothing. Now there seemed to Salvatore no meaning in any of the things which had once filled his days. It was wonderfully strange to him now that these things had ever meant so much to him, that they had kept him so interested and occupied that ten years had passed over his head and left him still in love with the first girl who had ever made his pulses beat quickly.

Christine's personality had remained with him like a light perpetually burning before a sacred shrine; its flame had grown larger and larger until it had lighted up the whole temple of his soul.

Would its flame still light up the sanctuary of his soul if he accepted her offer and went through a ceremony of mock marriage with her? That was the question. Rather than be faithless to his ideal of her and put out the flame of the sacred lamp, he would renounce the living vital woman. He was a Mazzini; whether he would or not he must remain faithful to his ideal. The woman he loved and had loved for ten years was the soul-woman. The little lamp which had kept his manhood pure, which had been his inner strength during his ten years of prosperity and adulation, could not burn before a desecrated altar. How desolate his life would be without that little lamp! How incomplete his poor attempt to satisfy his hunger for the woman!

"What can we do for her, Salvatore?" Zita said at last.

"Nothing, nothing," he said. "In suffering we are always alone, bambina."

"We have so much . . . money, I mean."

"Poverty means nothing. To me wealth is a mockery."

"I know. And yet . . ." Zita paused. "And yet . . ."

"Work will give her less time to think. Thoughts can kill; poverty seldom does. Remember, Poverty is the Child of Our Lady."

"It seems so terrible. If you married her, she would have been so wealthy. Now she has to go back."

"If we married," he said, " it could only have meant happiness for a short time."

"I know, Salvatore mio. I knew it while you seemed not to know it. I was so afraid for you. If we could only take up our old life again! We were so happy."

"There is no use trying to do that," he said quickly. "A shattered jar can never go to the well again."

"Veramente. But what are we to do? Tell me that."

Salvatore clasped her hand tightly. "First let me rest, little sister. I am so tired. To-morrow we will think; we will begin to reconstruct our lives, you and I."

"Si, si, domani, domani! To-morrow, to-morrow!"

CHAPTER XXXI

THERE is an old saying that to-morrow never comes. Nevertheless, on the morrow of the day on which Salvatore had come back to Girgenti to renounce Christine, Zita was seated all alone in the ponderously furnished salon of the albergo.

She was thinking and thinking and trying to devise some new means of arousing Salvatore. When he had sufficiently recovered and rested from the strain of parting with Christine, what on earth could she suggest that he should do?

An almost complete relapse had followed upon his farewell scene with Christine, which had taken place at dawn. She had gone by the first train to Palermo, crossing by the night boat to Naples, and thence to Ischia.

Zita knew so well that but for her own sake Salvatore would gladly slip out and be done with the struggle. He was so shattered and broken that for the present nothing which she might suggest would appear anything but a toil and a needless effort.

Her own world was, of course, saddened and completely changed because of Salvatore's wretchedness. Much as she loved Christine and deplored her loss as a sister, it was through Salvatore and his suffering that her real anguish came. With her anguish had come an unacknowledged longing to return to America. Waldo Langbridge's silent, and what seemed to her now very comforting and restful personality, would be helpful and so good for Salvatore. In America they had been excellent friends. She wondered what he would say of Salvatore's decision? Of course, he would approve of his doing what he thought was right, but would he understand Salvatore's point of view any better than Christine did? Did the Anglo-Saxon mind ever really meet the Latin on its own plane? Probably not, but anyhow it would be comforting to discuss things with him. They had discussed so many things together.

While Zita's thoughts were centred on Waldo Langbridge, Sardo Fontana was shown into the room. Zita smiled as she held out her hands; her eyes welcomed him.

"Come sta, Signorina?" he said wonderingly; her frank avowal that his coming pleased her was a pleasant surprise. He held her two hands eagerly as he said, "Amabile Signorina, I came to tell you something. . . . I should not have again intruded."

"Si, si, dimmi. Salvatore is ill; he is in bed. I am very troubled. I hope it is not bad news, amico mio?"

"Keep him in bed," he said quickly. "He is safe there. The Count is in Girgenti; he is waiting for him outside the hotel. Where is the Signora?"

"Christine has gone," Zita said. "They have parted. Happiness seems very far away."

"Donna mia, donna mia, they have quarrelled? But do not despair; with lovers partings are but re-unitings."

"No, no. They love each other more than ever. Poor Primavera! Poor Salvatore!"

"Has he renounced her? He will not marry her without the blessing of his Church?"

"He loves her too devoutly."

Sardo shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, don't!" Zita said imploringly. "He has fought and struggled so hard. He has loved her for all these years! Think of what it means to him!"

"I don't understand him."

"You respect him!"

"Veramente." The one word was burdened with truth.

"Thank you for that one word. Spiritually Salvatore is very strong, but physically he . . ." Zita left her sentence unfinished. "I have always had to take great care of him. In his youth he fed his brains and starved his body." Zita spoke simply and tenderly, as she always did about their early days of poverty. "Youth needs good food when it works very hard, amico mio."

Sardo's cry made her regret her words.

"Caro amico, they were happy days! But tell me what you have heard of the Count."

"While he is here in Girgenti Salvatore is safer in bed."

"He cannot always stay there."

"Something may happen before he is up and about. The Count may think he has left the town. Anyhow, for the present, will you stay with him? Don't leave the albergo."

"Do you really think he would harm Salvatore?"

"He has not forgotten his throttling; he will always be your brother's enemy."

"Oh, if only he were dead! If things could be as they were one short week ago! Why is he allowed to live?"

Before Sardo could answer her the door opened. It was the padrona.

"Will you go to the Cavaliere, Signorina? I think he is worse—my husband has gone for the doctor."

Zita's face blanched; her eyes filled with tears. "I must go, she said. "He has so little strength to fight against both fever and unhappiness."

Sardo Fontana put his arms round her and gathered her to his breast. At last their two hearts were beating together. Zita made no struggle; his physical support and sympathy were necessary to her at the moment.

"Caro amico, caro amico," she said, "I know you would help me if you could. You are so good . . . so . . ."

He interrupted her. "Go to him," he said. "And thank God I have held you in my arms!" He released her. "I am going to help you, Signorina; I am going to prove myself worthy of your gratitude."

Before he had finished speaking Zita had fled from the room. When he found himself alone and returned to earth, he said to himself, "There is only one way and I must take it. The Mazzinis are immovable; Salvatore will die rather than act contrary to his conscience or sacrifice his ideal. Well, if to prove my love I too have to die, death will be preferable to life without her, without her love."

CHAPTER XXXII

Some days later Zita received a letter from Waldo Langbridge. It was written from the Carlton Hotel in London.

With the open letter in her hand she went nervously to Salvatore's room. His temperature was at last almost normal, and although he was still very weak, he was in a convalescent state. When Zita entered the room he laid down the book which he had been trying to read.

"Look, Salvatore," she said, "read that." She laid the letter over his book. "Read that and tell me if you would like him to come, if you feel strong enough for a visitor."

Zita tried to conceal her nervousness. She felt almost humiliated, for her letters to Waldo must have betrayed more than she had imagined of her true feelings for him. He had been in England for four months, but she knew that he would not have written to her as he had done if her letters to him had not, so to speak, given her away.

Salvatore read the letter in silence. When he had finished it he folded it up and held it out to his sister. Zita took both the letter and her brother's hands eagerly in her own. Unfortunately the unspoken language of Sicily cannot be written. She slipped down on her knees and buried her face in the clothes. Salvatore felt her emotion.

"I am quite strong enough, bambina," he said, "if you are." His hand caressed her head. "Have you thought this well over?"

Great eyes were raised to his. She knew what he meant. This might mean the reconstructing of her life. Salvatore's words came back to her. Was she strong enough to decide? Could she ever be as happy with any other man as with Salvatore?

"Are you strong enough?" he asked again. "Do you know your own mind? If you don't, for pity's sake be definite! Don't play any longer with a strong man's feelings. Don't be feline."

Zita's eyes questioned him.

"I wonder if you will ever know what love means, sorella mia? You have one man's devotion and attention here—isn't that sufficient? If you don't really want Waldo, leave him alone." He paused. "Women are so different," he said languidly, "so utterly different."

"But, Salvatore . . ."

"No 'buts,'" he said sharply. "The time has come when you must stop playing with men's hearts. Tell Waldo not to come; tell him I am not strong enough, not nearly strong enough."

Zita was silent. Her brother was talking to her as he sometimes used to talk in the days when the difference in their ages had been more apparent.

"Go and tell him that," he said. "There must be no half measures—a man's love knows none."

Zita rose impetuously from her knees. "Very well, I will write to him at once. And you are right!" she said hotly. "Women are different. Men are always sure!

When they care for a woman they want everything from her; a woman only knows that she wants the man to want everything." She paused. "I believe women only marry because they are afraid that the man who wants them will marry someone else if they don't. Girls do, anyhow."

"That is a fact," Salvatore said. "But you've played long enough with Waldo. He has loved you ever since that night ten years ago . . ." Salvatore's eyes fell.

"Yes, I believe he has. And oh, Salvatore, what ages ago all that seems! And yet I can see you standing at the table with his father, while Waldo questioned me, just as clearly as if it had only happened yesterday."

Salvatore's hand went up to his eyes. "Immortal moments never grow dim," he said. "Go and write your letter. Tell him that we are leaving Sicily, and don't add any tender memories."

As Zita was leaving the room he called her back.

"What is going to happen to Sardo?" he said. "What does refusing Waldo mean?"

Zita looked confused. She was ashamed of herself. She ought not to have allowed Sardo to caress her; it had been on her conscience ever since. But at the moment her senses had demanded physical sympathy.

"What is going to be the end of Sardo?" Salvatore said again. "You are finishing off Waldo; don't be less merciful to Sardo." Salvatore's own hunger for Christine made him keenly sympathetic. "What is to be the end of Sardo? I want to know. You can't mean to marry him?"

Zita tried to laugh. "You are so serious, Salvatore. Heaven only knows what is going to be the end of Sardo, and *it* won't tell. I do wish men would realise that half a loaf is better than no bread at all."

"Which means that you want to go on playing the same selfish game."

"It means that I hate dismissing nice men for good and all, and yet I can't marry Sardo . . . you know I can't."

"Then what is going to be the end of him? Remember, he is a Sicilian, not an American."

"I told you before, fratello mio, only Heaven knows what is to be the end of him and *it* won't tell. Che sara sara." Zita spoke with assumed lightness. "In the meantime, don't you think that the dismissal of one lover and good comrade sufficient for this morning? I am to say that you are not strong enough—is that it?"

"Yes, not nearly strong enough," Salvatore said firmly. "Tell him that I never shall be strong enough." Having said these words, almost brutally, he pulled the bedclothes over his head and turned his face to the wall.

. . . .

Downstairs in the great salon of the hotel Zita wrote her letter. It was very definite and to the point. It left no doubt in Waldo Langbridge's mind when he read it.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A TRAGEDY had fallen on Girgenti.

What exactly happened no-one will ever know, for in Sicily on such occasions no-one is ever looking. Omertà forbids it.

From apparently nowhere and for no known reason the tragedy had hurled itself like a thunderbolt upon the Arcadian scene. Zita was reading aloud to Salvatore on the terrace of the hotel when the excitement began. At first she paid no attention to the uproar, for if the saying is true that one woman and a goose can make a market, it is equally true that in Sicily it takes but two excited men to make a tumult.

But the cries which came up from the road below drowned her voice. She put down her book. "I must go and see what it is all about," she said. "Listen!—Can you hear what they are saying?"

Salvatore shook his head. "It's sure to be much ado about nothing, or a pickpocket caught in the act—the people love that!"

Zita rose from her chair. "It must be more than that," she said. She leaned over the terrace wall to look.

A procession of men and women, field-workers and country folk who had been either going to or from the town, were following a party of men who were carrying someone on an improvised stretcher. Sobbing women had flung their aprons over their faces, while others were walking with their arms thrown up to the heavens. Their cries and long wails were Biblical and Eastern.

Two soldiers carrying a camp-oven-pot brought up the rear; they happened to be taking a picket their evening meal. A third soldier wearing a scarlet fez on his dark head was carrying a huge iron spoon. The steaming soup struck Zita at the moment as cruelly sardonic, for whoever it was who was lying so straight and still was either dead or dying. Truly in the midst of life there is death.

"What is it all about?" Salvatore called out, with the irritability of the convalescent.

Zita shook her head. "I don't know. I think someone has been killed—they are coming up the road—they will pass the hotel door."

As she spoke, the soldier with the iron spoon looked up. A woman's soft voice was more to him than a dead man. He had fought in the Tripoli war.

"What has happened?" Zita called out. "Has someone been injured?"

When the man's senses had enjoyed her beauty, he answered,

"E morto, Signorina, e morto," and passed on.

Zita called over her shoulder to her brother, "Someone is dead, someone of importance, I imagine." She looked down again at the crowd below. "How eloquent we Sicilians are!" she said to herself. "Imagine a crowd in

America saying all these fine things on the spur of the moment!"

She listened more acutely. Then her ears caught the cries of: "Povero orfano! Povero orfano!"

The words chilled her. A cold hand clutched at her heart. She hurried to Salvatore's side. He noticed her haunted face.

"Shall we go round to the door and find out what has happened?" Her words came brokenly.

Salvatore dropped the thick rug which had covered his legs and followed her across the terrace, through the big salon and down the old tiled passages until they reached the door. Never before had the hotel seemed to Zita so big and straggling.

As they approached the front door the padrona di casa and her heavy husband hurried to meet them. The illustrious cavaliere had not walked so far since his illness. He still looked alarmingly fragile and extremely beautiful, or so the woman thought. She threw up her hands and said:

"Oh, Signore, what a fatality! And he was such a good father! Who will now take the same care of his little son?"

As Zita looked at the woman her horrible dread became a certainty. Her heart almost suffocated her. She could not raise her voice above a whisper.

"And he was so handsome and generous, with a heart of pure gold!"

Zita grasped the woman's arm and made herself speak. "Of whom are you talking? Who is dead? Tell me."

Her super-senses had told her long ago, but her material self must hear the truth. The woman seemed to have been talking for hours.

"Have you not heard, carina? Signor Fontana has been shot through the lungs. He bled to death down at the temples. The custodi found his body in a pool of blood. But alas!" she said vindictively, "his murderer has escaped."

As she spoke she looked searchingly at Zita. She knew that the dead Signore had been in love with the girl, for he had brought a wealth of flowers and fruit to her brother while he was ill, and he had haunted the precincts of the hotel for many days past. The Signorina did not know how near her he had often been.

Zita turned to Salvatore. She was trembling; her face was stricken. Sardo's last words to her were ringing in her ears. But Salvatore had left her to seek information.

With a fine effort of self-control she questioned the woman. Was she sure that Signor Fontana was dead? Had the doctor seen him?

The woman shook her head. "Non so, Signorina, non so—the dead tell no tales. Ma! sacra Virgine, he could ill be spared!"

Before the woman had finished speaking Salvatore returned, with a face as white and stricken as Zita's. At the moment they were as like each other as two peas in a pod.

With the ghost of the dead man before them they remained silent. They dared not give voice to the fear which filled their hearts, for in Sicily silence is more than golden. They did not join in the general cry of "Povero Signore!" "Povero Signore!" Perhaps the emotion of the rabble kept them tongue-tied. This was not the first occasion upon which they had found themselves separated from their people.

But if their lips were silent, they were talking eloquently to each other in the ancient soundless language.

"Did you see him?" she said at length. "Did you manage to get any information?"

"Nothing at all," he said.

Zita took his arm impulsively. "Tell me—I want to hear you say so—you don't think he killed himself? Oh, you don't think that?" Her eyes entreated.

"No, no. We know, you and I . . . we know."

"Yes, we know." Her eyes fell from his. Alas! She knew so much more than Salvatore, so much more! How horrible it was! Sardo was dead and her letter had gone to Waldo. It made her feel a traitor to the dead man. Salvatore's mistaken interpretation of her added nervousness made her miserably self-conscious.

"What can we do?" she said. "What can we do for him? These people are kind, but you and I meant more to him. Only you and I understand. We can't leave him to them—we ought to be with his poor bleeding body."

"We can't do anything, carina," he said slowly. "It's best to let these good people manage things in their own way. And, after all, he was one of them. He was a true Sicilian at heart; only the outer man was changed."

Zita looked at her brother. He was speaking in an exaggeratedly unemotional way. From the moment that the woman had told them that Sardo was dead, Salvatore's eyes had forbidden her to say one word about Christine. That was the last word which must pass her lips. Yet all the time her super-senses knew that Salvatore was speaking to her in these cold even tones because he was trying to suffocate the clear voice which was telling him that as yet all the tragedy was not known. Sardo had met his death in trying to liberate Christine; but where was the Count?

Zita made no protest about not following the stretcher-bearers. Perhaps her brother was right.

"We can be nearer Sardo on the terrace, bambina," he said gently. "Let us go back. What they are following does not matter."

Zita pressed his arm more closely to her as she said, "Let us go back! Oh, Salvatore," she said impulsively, "Sicily is here! Is there any New York anywhere in the world?"

"Si, si, Sicily is here," he said gravely, "and you and I are her children."

It would have seemed cold-blooded and callous just to return to the quiet terrace if they had not known that Sardo would have wished it, that the last thing he would have desired was that Zita's name should be mixed up in the tragedy. Sicily is nourished on secrecy; it was their duty to regard the dead man's secret as theirs.

Just as they were leaving the hotel door a blood-curdling cry rang out. A fresh excitement had sprung up.

Zita remained rooted to the spot. Her super-senses instantly told her what the cry meant—that the second act in the tragedy had begun.

At the same moment a light victoria dashed up to the hotel door. In it was the guardian of the temples. He had flung the news to the gossips and idlers who had not followed the stretcher-bearers. He had told them that the hated Croat was dead. The seducer of virgins, the receiver of stolen goods, the traitor to Italy, had been found dead at the foot of the precipice rock which forms a platform for the Temple of Juno.

"Corpo di Bacco! But he is better dead!" was the oft-repeated verdict. The only thing to grieve about was that Girgenti was rid of a bad Croat at the expense of a good Sicilian.

Every town as well as country has its own code of morals, what is forgivable and what is unforgivable. In Rome you must still do as Rome does if you wish to be accepted of her people—which means, if you must sin, sin as Rome sins, or do not sin at all. To sin in any other way is worse than a sin—it is bad form. And so it is in Girgenti.

The Croat was better dead. Things were known to the citizens which made his sins unforgivable. No-one said "Povero Signore!" "Povero Signore!" Even the women did not weep. The gossips and the dawdlers who had come in for the second tragedy followed the guardian of the temples on his important mission to the police-station, and very soon a stillness had fallen on the Albergo, a stillness which to the brother and sister was burdened with the soul of the tragedy.

Before they returned to the terrace, Zita said to Salvatore, "Come into the house first and put on your coat and have some vermouth."

She had spoken mechanically. Salvatore obeyed her mechanically.

When he put the little glass back on the brass tray their eyes met. Salvatore's were even more forbidding than they had been. Zita was not to let that name pass her lips.

It was not to Zita, but to the wide heavens and the classic land which lay before them that Salvatore said, "Truly greater love hath no man."

Zita's cry stopped him. "Oh, Salvatore, say something! Even if we mustn't speak . . . the truth! Surely you know that my heart is bursting? Can't you say something to make me feel less like a murderess?"

"You could give him nothing to live for."

Zita's quick answer stopped him. Her eyes held his. "Tell me, could you, if you tried, *not* love? To love at command is no easier than *not* to love."

"I am a Mazzini. With us it is different." He shrugged his shoulders. "You loved no-one else, your love was not . . ."

Zita turned abruptly away; she interrupted impatiently: "You forget that I, too, am a Mazzini! I, too, can be faithful to an ideal."

"Sardo did not fill it?"

"He only fulfilled the ideal of a Sicilian girl; the new Zita . . . Well," she said hotly, "Sardo never blamed me. And am I to blame? Life is always changing; we change with it."

"These things are beyond us; they are not in our hands. I don't blame you, sorella mia."

As they paced the terrace restlessly, their talk came in snatches, mere fragments of their thoughts.

"He knew that I loved you better than anything in the world, Salvatore. He knew what your happiness meant to me. That is the meaning of everything."

Salvatore's unseeing eyes were following the flight of a falcon; he did not answer.

"He might have hesitated," Zita went on, "if Carlito's case had been less hopeless. He knew the Count's reputation as a shot."

"Is Carlito really doomed?"

"The doctor gives him six months, not more. He was born of a consumptive mother; it is in his bones."

"Do you think they met by appointment? They were obviously both armed."

"No, no. Let Girgenti think they did, let Sardo's secret be buried with his bones. No-one has the slightest suspicion; only you and I know the real story."

"And it was?" Salvatore's voice was hollow and grating.

"He loved me so much that he wished to bring me happiness through his gift to you. The man who blocked your path was better dead. You know, life is still held very cheaply in Sicily, when it is without hope. Sardo took the sporting chance." Zita shivered. "If he had lived and the Count had died. . . ."

"My God!" Salvatore said. "Don't say it, don't say it! At Licata I should have killed the traitor!"

"And in doing so have broken two women's hearts!"

Salvatore covered his face with his hands; his frail body shook.

"Remember," Zita said, "Sardo made this sacrifice for me, not for you. It was his sacrament to love."

"Sacra Virgine! And would you have me walk over his dead body to embrace the woman I love?"

"Love was such a very simple and definite thing to Sardo, that I feel sure that if he could speak to you now he would beg you to accept with gratitude the gift he has bestowed on you. He would not understand you if you refuse it. La Primavera was to be yours because I could not be his; the whole thing rests on me." She spoke calmly and firmly. She was so afraid that the excitement and tragedy of the evening would bring on another attack of fever that she almost succeeded in subduing her own feelings. Her anxiety to comfort and relieve her brother helped to calm her own nerves.

Salvatore did not answer her. He had flung himself down on a long chair; he felt so physically and mentally exhausted that he only wished to lie like a log, completely outside the realm of thought.

It was pelasant to rest under the ever-deepening violet sky and wait for the coming stars. In his highly-strung condition his ears were tuned to the very finest sounds; he could distinguish unconsciously the difference between the quick patter-patter of the small donkeys and the longer strides and heavier tread of the mules' feet on the road below. The cries of the homing rooks and the helpless pleading of the little kids were not sounds; they were only a part of the evening.

His only consciousness was the desire to keep back thought, to keep the door of his mind tightly closed. For with thought came questions which hurt his tired head and exhausted his feeble body.

Even Zita's silent presence became a burden, for her thoughts were affecting his. She was going over and over their old life in Casa Salvatore; her first meeting with Sardo and her horrible scene with the Count; and lastly Sardo's body, bleeding to death amongst the asphodels.

Like film pictures these things were passing before her eyes. The screen on which they were presented was Sicily, which lay stretched out beyond the high terrace.

And so the time passed, as time ever does pass, like water through the hands of Sicily's children. Suddenly the silence was broken, and for a moment their minds were torn from the past and focussed on the material present. It was the voice of Giulio Romano.

"Il pranzo e pronte, Signore." He said the words with suitable solemnity.

Dragged back to the routine of the day, Zita thanked him and said mechanically, "The dinner is ready, Salvatore."

Giulio Romano left the terrace and returned to the dining-room, where he held his soul in patience for twenty minutes. At the end of that time, he employed his idle hands in slipping on to cheap Sicilian cigars the gold bands which had been carefully removed from expensive Manilla ones.

In Sicily the devil never misses his chance.

. . . .

Darkness had fallen on the southern landscape before the brother and sister left the terrace. It was only when the cathedral bell boomed through the stillness that Zita rose determinedly from her chair.

"It is quite dark, and so cold, Salvatore. Do come in. I suppose we must eat our dinner and go to bed as usual. And of course it will be boiled mullet, and of course it will be decorated with marguerites and pink begonias, and of course Giulio Romano will offer it to us as if we had never eaten one before."

As they rose from their chairs she looked towards the temples. "To-day is over. Salvatore, to-morrow this will be yesterday."

Salvatore knew what she meant. To-day Sardo had been one with the living; to-morrow he would be one with the dead. To-morrow would not know him. Thus quickly do the sands of time slip through the hour-glass.

Giulio Romano hurried forward to receive his guests, and when they were seated at table he appeared at Zita's side with a long boat-shaped dish in his hand. In it lay a grey mullet decorated with pink begonias. He apologised. The fish was now quite cold, and it had been procured with great difficulty as a treat for the Signore. Delicate fish was good for one with so little appetite.

The ghost of a smile lit up Zita's face. She looked at Salvatore; his eyes too held a kindly smile.

Fratello mio," Zita said, "that flower-decked mullet is as typically Sicilian as Sardo's death."

"Si, si," he said gravely, as his eyes lingered on the long grey fish. "Nostro paese, nostro caro paese, nostro paese immutabile, nostro paese violente."

CHAPTER XXXIV

One month later Zita was playing with Carlito on the terrace of the hotel. The child had lived with her since his father's death and had benefited by her sound commonsense and vigilant care. He was clapping his hands with delight because Zita's steady hand had placed an Italian flag on the top of the castle which he had built with bricks, when the padrona ushered a visitor out on to the terrace.

The moment Zita caught sight of the man who was striding across the terrace to reach her, she became alarmed; her knees trembled.

Before she had time to think or act Waldo Langbridge had gathered her up in his arms. Carlito's castle was scattered to the four winds. Knowing his woman, he gave her no chance to escape. She had laid her cards on the table; there must now be no revoking. He had come to demand her complete surrender. And womanlike, Zita enjoyed his method of wooing. To be folded in protecting arms and kissed into forgetfulness came as a merciful healing to her stricken soul. With Waldo's lips on hers and her heart beating against his breast, her old fear that she did not know whether she loved him sufficiently to renounce her freedom seemed absurd. Surely she never could not have known?

She had only been in her lover's arms for a few moments and yet it seemed as though it must have been in her former incarnation, when she was afraid to acknowledge even to herself her love for him. In these few moments he had become her lover as completely and surely as though they had been engaged for many months. If the whole Albergo full of prying eyes were looking down upon them, well—let them say that which they say.

It was Carlito's petitioning voice that told her how short a time she had been in Waldo's arms.

"Do tell him to go away, Auntie Zita, and stop bothering us." The child's eyes scrutinised Waldo. "I like your face," he said thoughtfully, "but your big feet have spoilt my castello."

Waldo picked the child up in his arms. "Why, sonnie," he said, "I will build you a far better one. It will be a wonderful castle for a beautiful princess. And what do you think is the name of the beautiful lady?"

The child shook his head.

"I call her Princess Love; you call her Auntie Zita. I'm really awfully sorry I spoilt your castle, but you see, Princess Love is so quick that I was afraid that she'd run away if I didn't snatch her up in my arms at once."

Carlito looked at him with puzzled eyes. "Do you really and truly mean Auntie Zita?"

"Yes, your Auntie Zita is my Fairy Princess, and I'm going to build her a beautiful castle."

Carlito put his unhealthy little hand in Zita's. "Is that true?" he said anxiously. "Or is the new man saying these things because I am a little boy?"

"It is true, Carlito, and the castle is to be called 'Castell' Amore,' and you shall come and live with us. But look!" she cried, "here comes your old friend." She turned to her lover. "The child worships Salvatore and Salvatore adores the child. Carlito has really done his spirits and general health a lot of good."

When Salvatore saw them standing together a look of astonishment and at the same time of great satisfaction crossed his face. Like a flash of summer sunshine on a Highland lake, it dispersed its habitual melancholy.

Waldo stretched out a hand to him. His other was clasping Zita's waist. They were obviously declared lovers.

"You can see how things are," Waldo said laughingly. "I didn't lose any time after I got your message. I came as quickly as trains could carry me."

Salvatore's whole being asked for an explanation as he said, "Journeys end in lovers' meetings."

"Yes—my journey's finished, thanks to your message."

Salvatore only looked at him.

"You dear old thing!" Zita said. "Don't you know what happened, why Waldo came so quickly? Tell, him, Waldo, and spare my . . ." She stopped. "Oh, Salvatore, you are a goose!"

"Why, I came because your sister wrote and told me that your health was pretty bad, but that you were quite strong enough to enjoy a visit from an old friend. She was kind enough to say that nothing would do you so much good as my company."

Salvatore gazed at Zita, whose whole being was rippling with mischievous happiness.

"You sent that message from me to Waldo? You wrote that after asking my advice?"

"Yes, I wrote that and a good deal more, apparently, from what Waldo says. Are you glad or sorry, Salvatore? Don't look so surprised—you ought to have known I'd do it."

"I do hope you aren't sorry," Waldo said drily, "for I've come to stay. Zita's letter didn't suggest a return ticket."

Salvatore laughed happily. "I never knew Zita to do such a deceitful thing before," he said tenderly. "All this time I have been imagining that she had dismissed you. She told me that she didn't know if she cared for you and she knew that she cared for her freedom and her life with me, so I told her that she was not to allow you to come to Sicily; it was not to be the same old game. I forbade it. I said I wouldn't have it."

Waldo laughed delightedly.

"Off she went with her head in the air to write the letter, and we've never alluded to the subject since."

"What have you to say to that?" Her lover's eyes caressed Zita's glowing face.

"Salvatore was treating me as he used to treat me when he put me to bed and smacked me when I was naughty; the grown-up Zita wouldn't stand it." She linked her arm affectionately in her brother's. "You see, fratello mio, I didn't think you were managing your own affairs well enough to allow you to manage mine."

Salvatore freed himself from her clinging hand. "Go back to your lover," he said with mock harshness. "It seems to me I managed yours extremely successfully. Come, Carlito," he said in the same breath, "we shall have to comfort each other." He picked up the inquisitive Carlito.

The child's arms went round Salvatore's neck. "The new man's promised to build a beautiful castle for Auntie Zita. It's to be called Castell' Amore, and it is to be so big and so strong that it will never fall down."

Salvatore was nervously anxious to leave the lovers, whose welcome of his inopportune coming had been so charming.

"Bless you both," he said with mock lightness. "I believe Zita cares for you enough, Waldo, to be happy in Casa Salvatore. But build your castle and give it deep foundations and wide bastions. Castell' Amore must stand the test of age and change. Come on, bambino," he spoke to Carlito, "come and let us get a big gun and a very lean dog and go and shoot a yellowhammer. There is nothing like a good day's sport in the mountains for settling the nerves after a severe shock. We must take a big game bag to hold the yellowhammer and put an eagle's feather in our caps." His eyes laughed back to Zita. "It will just remind Auntie Zita that Sicily is here, that Girgenti is not New York."

As he hurried out of sight Zita turned to her lover, whose arms were ready for her.

"Dear Salvatore!" she said. "Sicily is here, and New York is here, and the whole wide world." She looked at her lover with melting eyes. "And only twenty minutes ago I didn't know that! I didn't know that being in your arms could make me wonder why I ever could have been such a fool!"

"Perhaps our happiness will bring him to his senses."

"Ah, you think like that?" Zita's eyes looked eagerly up into her lover's.

"He will be lonely," Waldo said.

"Desperately lonely," Zita whispered, as her lips left her lover's. Her sigh was self-accusing.

"It is the best thing that could happen. Loneliness may do for him what commonsense never will."

At that moment Salvatore was trying to shut his eyes to the picture of his own empty home when Zita had left him. Her happiness must be his only thought; he must not let her even suspect the dread that filled his heart.

CHAPTER XXXV

ISCHIA: SIX MONTHS LATER

Christine was resting after her hard day's work at the baths. She was still living in Salvatore's grandmother's cottage.

Her letters, which she had just read, were lying on the table before her. One was from Zita, who was in Japan. Every sentence in the letter except the one which briefly alluded to her brother's loneliness was expressive of radiant happiness. It was signed "Yours devotedly, Gioconda." By this Christine knew that life for Zita at least was full of laughter and love.

She picked up another letter which she had already read through twice; she almost knew it by heart, so keenly had it hurt her. As her eyes scanned it her face hardened.

"Hotel Metropole,
"Nice.

"My Dear Christine," the letter ran,

"I am at present staying in Nice, as I have had to do for some winters for my health, which has not been at all good for the last few years. I read last spring—in the Nice edition of the 'New York Herald'—that your husband had been killed in some disgraceful affair in Sicily. I am thankful to say that your name did not appear in connection with the case. I have been expecting to hear from you ever since, but as no letter has reached me, I am going to send this through your father's lawyer—I suppose he knows your address.

"Now that you are alone I feel I must offer you a home, as I imagine your husband had nothing to leave you. If he has provided for you and if all that I prophesied did not come true, I shall only be too glad to own that I was in the wrong and that I misjudged him. You could make yourself very useful to me in my present state of health, so do not hesitate to accept the home I am offering to you. I cannot help thinking that if your marriage had been as happy and successful as you expected it to be, you would have looked up some of your old friends and relations, instead of carefully hiding yourself away in some out-of-the-way corner as you have done, ever since the day you married Andrea Zarano. Hoping to hear from you soon,

"I remain, your affectionate aunt,
"HARRIET BULLOCK."

"Poor Aunt Harriet!" Christine said, as she threw down the letter as something unclean and defiling. "Just as if I wouldn't rather beg my bread than accept one crust from your hands! Fancy telling her that she was right—that the Christine Lovat who stood before her in her night-dress in Girgenti that night, and openly defied her for the first time, was a young fool! Fancy acknowledging to a woman like that that what she prophesied and a vast deal more had come true! And picture her amazement if I told her that even after that lesson—as she would call it—I wanted to marry another 'foreigner,' and that 'foreigner' the humble curio-dealer Salvatore, the youth who lived on 'squeezes.' "

Christine's eyes travelled to the photograph of Salvatore which hung on her cottage walls. His smile greeted her every time she opened the door. It was her "salve."

"But this time my husband will not be a pauper, Aunt Harriet. Indeed," she said wistfully, "I almost wish Salvatore was poor—or, at least, not so awfully rich—so that I might prove to him that if he hadn't a lira in the world I should marry him just as gladly! Being poor in Ischia hasn't made me hate poverty." She looked round her simply furnished home. Her eyes softened.

It had not made her hate poverty because Salvatore had made her two-roomed cottage sacred. His spirit communed with her there. If she returned to her aunt, what would it mean? Comfort and luxury, but in luxury's train would come vulgarity, loss of spiritual and artistic perception, and more important than all, loss of close association with all that she prized most in life.

It is true that almost a year had passed since her husband's death, and Salvatore had neither written to her nor sent her any message through Zita. And yet, Christine, for no better reason than what her super-senses told her, was confident that some day he would come and claim her. She did not allow herself to think how long it might take to bring him to her; always she drove out the thought with hard work. Her confidence in the belief that he would eventually come gave her an almost supernatural physical strength, while spiritually she was contented to await her triumph.

She had become very philosophical in her acceptance of life. She could review all its tragedies and sorrows in a well-balanced and critical fashion—that is to say, on her best days. She had her black-letter days as well, but she had not grown old on regrets. Like a good Scot she could fight with her back to the wall, fight as desperately as any kilted soldier of her race; she was the sort of fighter who feels stimulated and not unnerved by a losing game. She had the enviable quality of getting the best out of the worst and holding out her arms to the sun.

Her aunt's letter had to be answered; and she would enjoy answering it and trying to put into it as many sharp stings as Mrs. Bullock had contrived to put into hers. The Christian sentiment, "turn your other cheek to the smiter," did not appeal to Christine; she thoroughly enjoyed slapping the smiter's cheek until it was redder than her own. She was not built on saintly lines; her halo would not be worn for meekness.

Before the letter was written or even begun, a knock came to the door. It was Pepino Ignazio, the cab-driver, and the father of little Ninfa, upon whose contorted limbs Christine had performed miracles. The child's name was no longer a cruel jest; she could run about and enjoy herself almost as freely as any other of the black-eyed, straight-limbed children who played about the streets and rocks like sparrows. Pepino Ignazio's light victoria, if such a grand name could be given to his small vettura, was always at Christine's disposal after his day's work was done. He had now called at her cottage to ask her if she would like to take a drive, to breathe "l'aria fresca," as he described it.

Christine refused the man's offer on the score of having important letters to write. She pointed to her correspondence, which satisfied the amazed Pepino, who only received one letter a year, from his brother in California.

Pepino's arrival and departure drove Christine's mind back into reverie; her aunt's letter was forgotten. Unconsciously there rose up before her the vision of the greatest and wildest drive Pepino had ever taken her.

It was the day after her abrupt return to the Island from Sicily, when her heart was bitter and sore, when Salvatore's behaviour had seemed to her unnecessarily cruel and unnatural. It was a day when a drive over the mountain wildness of the volcanic Island would have seemed to most people an act of madness. To Christine it was what the condition of her mind needed. She wished to drive right into the mists and storm-shrouded mountains, to feel the passion of Nature and the driving rain scourging her cheeks.

How emblematic of her life the day now seemed to her! Truly, mists still shrouded her future, but her certainty of eventual happiness was as complete as her belief had been that day that at mezzo giorno the rain would cease and the sun would shine again.

She roused herself; her letter to her aunt must be written. She rose from her seat and got her letter-pad. The letter was complete in her brain; the writing of it did not take her long:

"My Dear Aunt Harriet,

"Thank you very much for your offer of a home. My husband's death has left me very much better off than you imagine, so I am thankful to say that my future need cause you no anxiety.

"I regret to hear that your health is troubling you. The alkaline and saline baths of Ischia work wonderful cures, both for sciatica and rheumatism. There are some springs in the sea here too hot to put one's foot into. I remember that you used to suffer from rheumatism—perhaps these baths would cure you?

"I remain,
"Your affectionate niece,
"CHRISTINE ZARANO."

"That's pretty nasty," she said as she read the letter over. "It doesn't tell her much and it's quite grateful enough for all she ever did for me! Probably she is only offering me a home now, because she thinks I could be of use to her."

Before the letter was addressed and stamped, a shrill whistle announced the arrival of the five o'clock steamer from Naples. Christine looked at her clock.

"Either the boat is early or my clock is slow," she said. "What an age I have been idling!"

She put away her writing-pad and crossed the passage to her bedroom. She looked at herself in the small glass. Was she tidy enough to go out, or must she change her dress? She decided to change it. Nothing kills youth in a woman more quickly than a disregard for her personal appearance. Christine fought against it.

When her dress was changed she discovered that there was a hole in her stocking which showed just above the heel of her shoe. It, too, must be changed. When at last she was ready to put on her hat, a second knock came to the front door.

"Oh, bother it!" she said. "Someone else come to use up my precious time."

"Avanti!" she called out impatiently. She listened to hear if she could recognise the step. "Please wait," she said. "I shall be ready in two minutes." Her impatience had fled, for after all this second delay was her own fault. She had wasted time day-dreaming, and it was probably the grateful parent of some patient whom she was treating come with an offering of eggs or a chicken or a fine cake from Naples.

"Who is it?" she asked, as she crossed the dividing passage. This time her voice was cheerfully inviting.

"It is me, Christine, your Salvatore!"

As he spoke a cry rang through the cottage. It carried the woman's soul to the man who at last had come for her. It bore her into his arms. It told him all that he hungered to know.

"It is your own Salvatore, donna mia, your own Salvatore. He is here, he has come for you."

The words were whispered into her ears while their hearts were beating together. His lips stifled the words she tried to say. "Oh, Salvatore mio! Salvatore mio! It can't be true! It can't be Salvatore, not lui stesso!"

He held her more closely. "Yes, it is himself, it is your own Salvatore, Primavera. Will you let him stay or has he come too late?"

Christine's body, so moth-like in its lightness, so exquisite in its passion, clung to him. It assured him that he must never go away, never, never again. He held her closer and still closer. The hunger of years was in his embrace. There was surely no material woman to kill, if Love could kill. She was the spirit of Love clothed with the sweet fragrance of woman.

"Donna mia," he murmured, "cara Signora, cara, cara Signora!" These were the only words he whispered, for they were the dearest of all his dear names for her. They were to carry them back to the young world of their ideals, to the wonderful days in the Laughing Land when the poor Mender of Images had given her his heart for all time.

A silence more golden than the marigolds, which with the first breath of spring carpet the land they both loved, spoke to them in melodies unheard. It took them far away. Together they were on dangerous ground again; they had forgotten the jealousy of the forsaken gods. They were very far away, these two, from Isola d'Ischia, which at that particular moment was occupied with the steamer traffic.

The little island did not know that the boat from Naples had brought Heaven before death to the man and the woman in the whitewashed cottage who stood locked in each other's arms. Isola d'Ischia did not understand that the coming of the evening boat had ended the tragedy of Casa Salvatore.

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